

Night Wings

Poems by

P. L. Williams

Spreading the Ashes of God

This early January snowstorm in the South might as well
Be the ashes of God as ice: limbs stagger drunk into noon
Waving birds upward to their creator. The concrete statue
Of St. Francis that guards my dead garden drops its Rosary
Into dreams of forsythia and leather gloves. So I take my hands
Full of these ashes and spread them among the crystal Lord.

Love is the melting time. God spills from my bare paw,
Evaporates into such a sun that prisms unclench themselves.
God's ashes make their own colors, sunset, death mask,
Poplar bark, the onset of skating where the marsh has gone stone.
I spread God back to God, and chickadees, thinking I have
Brought food, dive for the residue. All they find is heaven.

I am larger than God, am the token of his resurrection
On this slope. God has frozen into the ashes of reason
And weeps because of his uselessness. Science is crystalline,
Crushed down to weeping. My hands burst into flame
And our neighbors think it's some kind of laughter,
That such snow is giggling at the thought of rain.

No snow. These are the ashes of God that I broadcast
Among the buried slopes of fescue and moss, and God
Sighs against me, and I fall apart into snow apes and angels.
I evolve as God rises once more, vapor on vapor,
Into the shedding limbs, and I crawl to the pond's edge
And see, among the faces there, eyes much like my own.

The Days of Our Becoming

I have evaporated two-thirds from this trail,
And I want buds and campfire smells around me,
The rising brands that burn out only at the edge
Of fear or dawn. It is our motion they will not recall,
How we leaned toward dandelion crowns to blow,
The shape of the genuine, the angle of a dash
From base to base in the days of our becoming.

We awaken one day beyond the arch of cynicism
To understand the plural: lost affections, flames
Blown out in the wind of youth, grapes like pearls
Fed to us one by one from the hands of grown children.
It is the grand statement they will not recall,
The bell and ledger, the book of genealogy spread out
On a table with girls reduced to letters in a name.

I would exchange years for these kestrel wanderings
In a wood whose markings I have never known:
Soon I will find myself shawled in the sunlight
Of a chair with rubber wheels, bent up in the fire
That is only afternoon of a modest and unknowing day.
This trail is the only one we may choose, breaking
As we are, broken as we must always be.

Directions for My Children to Find Me

Night has bled below me in the woods,
And from my aging bed I walk down upon the voice of owls.
Deer exhale twin jets of fog from their nostrils.
I walk at the side of memory.

My people shared the story of their flames,
Their cold rain that knocked foxed leaves from oaks
And into water that bore them toward oceans,
Always south. Living means we may find

The direction of things, shape the family by degrees.
Living means gray remains until the black turns up
Painted like the basement of a church on Thursday night.
I walk at the shoulder of memory.

Come, my children, into the warm heart of fog
As I leave you for the woods whose dead and dying trees
Hold their ground like an old man's teeth.
Come, my children, into the threat of owls.

We must not break at sorrow's song, that bird call
Of impractical love. We must not fail to move.
Living means that we are moving toward or away
From the fracture in our blood. Living means

I may die outside your precious keeping
But I shall not die outside the sight I gave you
That morning when we walked below us to the woods,
And I revealed your sad and loving patrimony.

Night spreads the sound of wings. Frogs cheer.
The trails will know when we arise from bed,
Before we have known it ourselves, that we move
Toward the fungal paradise of fallen logs.

Trace my lineage back: Send me on a pointless chase
For butterflies and family trees, shape me into all fathers,
Then forgive me in that old descent, forgive me
In the color of bright insects, which are stars.

The End of the Affair

Go in peace
My former love
For we have broken
Ourselves blind

Upon faith
And your arms
Never confuse themselves
With my arms any more

Great mysteries
Bore us, sanctities
That whispered our rain names
Which were not the same

As the names we wore
In public, my former love,
And this breaking
Is not a dawn

It is nothing familiar
Like honey or touch
Or your shower steam
As it fogs up my heart

It is nothing familiar
Like poverty, long walks,
Laundromats, letters
From separate towns--

Go in peace
With your stories and stride
And be charitable to me
In all things blue and brown

And remember my shape
In clouds and in singing
And how I called you
From a thousand moons

The Late Decembers: On Reading “The Late Decembers”

Bombast, of course. A word I always presumed had something to do with airplanes during World War II, the b/w images of roaring metal monsters giving birth through clouds over Europe. Or, shot, bleeding fuel through the fair-weather Cumulus, babies exploding down her gut: a distasteful presumption. But what I mean to say is *ballast*, a seasonal adjustment, such as remembering tadpoles at the antipodes, wriggling for summer as if it were an ovum, but never mind. The lexicographers will straighten this out later. The important thing is *bullies*, and they were always after me in late December, reflexive fools who cut me open with bombing shears, drained my blood so I'd crash on the field in full view of the band at halftime. They'd be laughing so hard. So, *bitter*, like berries before their time or men whose hitch was almost up feeling the feral shudder of flak thudding into engine cowls and knowing that some corner of a foreign field is forever the grave site of their scattered hearts. I've crammed these planes with boys who thumbed my nose, squeezed my arm until it went thin with pain. The canopy cracks, the cold rushes in, the tadpoles writhe, and cringe into crescents. They say this is too much, that such violence will be seen only as bombast, and I tell them how very sorry I am and stop firing, and one grabs me by the head, and they knuckle my crew-cut until I'm bleeding orders. Why this should happen in late December each year is unclear to me, but the dictionary I will carry to my grave gives a number of possible meanings, and I have ruled out *buddy* and *boon* and *bellwether* and so on. It wasn't my idea to give birth to the child. I was gliding higher than cranes when my stomach's door opened, and the infant dropped, fins out, heading toward an area where civilians were drinking tea and expecting nothing that particular day. But they knew this was war, after all. They knew they wouldn't get off that lightly.

The Pleasure of Being

I awoke and was not angry anymore,
Like finding you had misplaced testicular cancer
While grocery shopping or walking the dog.

I am surprised. I thought I'd grow fierce.
I thought my rage would wipe out forests
Like a meteor in Siberia, all ragged edges

And fire from a distant frozen system.
I thought the glaze of my eyes might ignite
Shopping centers. I would die in agony.

Instead, my cat is sitting in my lap
Purring with me, and he is saying
He is not especially hungry or cold

Or sleepy or playful. He is saying that
Everything suits him at this moment,
That cats sleep in a coat of lasting light.

The Reason for Language

Along the creek this morning in mid-December I have not spoken
Your name in the vocabulary of mist, my brother who has died
Among the graves of town, quiet among the new moons
Of light along the sidewalks. I have not made that shape
Because words cannot resurrect our blood, our blue innocence.

I came past Caldwell's Pond yesterday and a great blue heron
Stood in its breath, not blue but gray as rain, and I thought
Of camping trips. We need these persuasions of feather and time,
But we do not believe them. I have never believed them.
The heron did not shift with a heavy wind just as the rain came.

Now, the air is dense as tears and speaking in syllables of rain,
And I begin the incantations to bring you back. Not in words,
Of course, for words cannot break or bleed, cannot change colors
With our seasons. They cannot lift us among the branches
Of childhood's half-beloved tree houses, where we stood

Tall as God and dared the traveling hunters of tree houses
To find us and fire: We were invisible, invulnerable, and light
Came from our eyes and fingers. We strengthened the gravity
Of fields and woods, brought planets down to circle around
Our campfire where brands flew like the wonder of stars.

Now in this creek edge in December, your name broken into stars,
I want to say the word for your rising. I want you to come forth
From the foam as boys will, shoulders shaking off the laughter,
My childhood brother. I want you to give me the proper sequence
Of songs, so that I may sing, so that I may charm you back

Among the reeds and the charms of my arms' bare branches.
I want to see you rise in a mystery so sublime that I will reach
High as tree houses or stars and say the word that breaks
Me with a genuine and lapping sorrow by this creek in December:
I want to say *alive*, and then you will be here, and I will believe.

The Tract of Feminism

She was calling me in the color of winter trees.
I loved that about her: She was the sole witness
To what I had done and told no one, not even herself.
Women cannot lie unless they lie about their love
In which case they lie endlessly and with mercy.
This is what makes them as human as the dawn.

What makes them as human as the dawn is their suspicion
That all the things we claim to die for, we would not
Die for. Men claim they would die for country,
For love, for property rights, for freedom--whatever.
They do, and they lie, endlessly and without knowledge.
This is what makes them as human as the night.

What makes them human as the night is their musculature,
Which is designed for cruelty. They saw down forests.
They scythe armies of cruel and frightened boys. She said
This is just one thing that makes me human and therefore
Unworthy of my calling. I have tried to remember my calling.
This is what makes me human as a cloak of sea clouds.

What makes me human as a cloak of sea clouds is the love
I show her when she stabs at me with her mother's knife.
Women keep that shape alive, the pierce, the blade, the cut
Swelling with blood each month for men the color of winter trees.
That's what you will never understand about me, she said.
This is what makes men prepare for war. They smell your blood.

This is what makes men prepare for war, the blood we shed
For them. She said it makes her sick the way we come in lines
Across open fields of fire, sniffing them out. Our leaves should
Blast away with some idle hurricane looking for a port in darkness.
That would be rich and good. And you would deserve it again.
This is what makes men as unimportant as, for example, men.

The Translation

He said, "Don't nobody like no big shots
Knocking around them roads where our daddies
Drove liquor and you'd better by God believe it."
I, his translator and guide, turned to the crowd
In the auditorium and smiled and spoke into my separate
Microphone: "We cannot bear our past, the myth
Of automobiles and their residue of corn and breath,
The speed of cigars, the shadows of power,
For small-county power is indomitable in the South.
We cannot bear our powerlessness, but we must
Bear it, for that is the power of the country poor,
That they grow a cash crop of resentments against
Those who would take away what little remains."

He said, "You hot damn rat about that, a matter
Of having no rats at all, ain't no man no better
An' me is all it's about." I cleared my throat:
"Our boundaries are slender. We can own farmed-out
Cotton land and walk the property lines and be gods,
Raise pine pyres to the wives who left for cities
And never came home. We are waiting for them here
In the darkness of the land, and all around us,
Names are falling, falling like rain that will not grow a thing,
Even field weeds in the most fertile season of the year."

The Undefined Country

Love is one example of it. A flowing in the brain chemistry
As if we bathed in oxycodone and every nerve ending flowered.

Awakening one morning and realizing we will live forever
Is another example. There's no hurry. No act is about time.

Walking with a dog, thinking the gummy web of winter limbs
Is random, knowing something is about to change

For the better or the worse, like falling in love with an actress
Trapped in a film from the Forties, these are examples, too.

There are many instances: A pilgrim singing in the woods,
Then finding out you have a patch of Benedictine moss,

And it is praising God, which to that damp greenery is soil,
Nothing more than the rocky loam farmers avoid mostly.

Have you noticed that your wedding ring has shrunken
Through the years until it cuts off all the blood from one nail

And it goes cyanotic? The evidence is persuasive and complete.
Or what I should have said is love is not a good example.

In truth, nothing is going on around here, and we all know it.
Go ahead and bleed and be done with it soon. Don't blow it.

To the Victims of Orion

All the systems fell on Mexico, but a few fell on southern Texas
 Where Juanita used native dyes to turn the fabric so red
 It always glistened like fresh blood. Some blamed it on her.
 One galaxy blew out the Yucatan like a pool shark's puff.
 Another came skidding at a low angle and severed Plano,
 Spent it over the Bay of California, dealing shingles
 On the table of water, face up.

Then the belt became unclasped

And it whipped and rolled toward Chiapas, snow stars,
 Snake winds: Their old men foretold just such a story
 And it was colored with their native dyes, and it was blood.

The Gulf of Mexico gulped in. Miami had a hundred-mile shore
 Of stinking rot, flapping death, teeth and cutting fins.
 The waterfall at New Orleans was a thousand feet or less.
 A vendor printed tickets before the Mississippi reached its floor.
 There was more: Popacatapetal drifted twice then sank
 In a boiling rash. Mayan ruins crashed on Dallas like a smirk.

Juanita ran off when his belt began to strip. She knew what happened
 Next when the belt was gone. He would find her squatting
 In the ditch and beat her and say, "Your clothes bleed,
 And you will bleed, and there is no lucky star to stop me now."
 Fine tale, she thought, laughing up celestial storms:

Come get me now,

Come out of this still shining, you cold son of a bitch.
Come and get me now.

Wanting to Believe

They say there's weather
Back in Alabama coming soon.

*(Do not protect me anymore.
I smell flowers on the wind.)*

They say the boy who killed
Himself died alone. He did not.

He died with this terrible weight
In his shoes. He was going nowhere.

*(Do not love me anymore.
I hear symphonies in the small graves.)*

They say the peach crop will be
Good this summer. You cannot know

What those wretched trees sacrifice
Each year. We tear their children.

*(Do not speak to me in anger.
I cannot live in that sanctuary.)*

They say I should write manuals
For lawnmower assembly. All right.

I will include instructions
For weather, for all small infinities.

*(Do not stop touching me.
I want to believe in my body.)*

Warden of the Weather

The sky is the color of varnish, meaning storms
Have passed or may hit within a few hours.
I might as well cut the ring fingers off both hands
For all I can play Chopin tonight and present
Romanticism-as-the drunkard when the funnel unshingles
Every structure in the neighborhood. We will look out
And see the storm dealing them like cards
But I won't stop playing to turn over my hands
And see if I have kings and aces. Not enough fingers
For both.

Let's breed some feral monster with three DNA hands
Who can play Liszt faster than a gnawing wind,
Wild, sensitive, a lover for whom women would kill,
Fifteen fingers for each swell of eroticism. He'd be
Popular at parties, a worse ham than George Gershwin,
Not afraid of boredom, of games like Hearts and Rummy.

Let's make him warden of the weather, and when he goes off,
Windmill arms whirling at the crest of the highest point
In the neighborhood, we'll know that the varnish sky
Should have been a clue that God was in the music,
That, all along, we should have been taking notes.

What Threatens Me Threatens You

Yellow jackets mumble in their battlements this afternoon
 At the wood's edge, humming for security as I arrive
 Lumbering in last autumn's leaves. I saved my son once
 From their earth-tight nest, heard his cries as they dotted
 Legs and arms with yellow and black, bent up ferociously
 To sting and die. I took his chest, threw him on to the lawn
 And brushed their darts away. They moved upon me then,
 Pawn to pawn, locked in an arch of close quarters. Alive,
 We did not suffer shock, smeared balm upon the wounds.

I want to weave Penelope's elaborate metaphor, believe
 That in their cells the yellow jackets chant like Benedictines
 For the coming Vespers when dew will damp down their wings
 And leave them pointless. Or unravel that approach with cameras
 And a quiet-voiced narrator who speaks of the social animals,
 Because we shared that impulse to defend our kind.

We do, we must, we aim for anything not quite us
 On afternoons like this one: What essential selfish shell
 Surrounds us, from which we rise, embattled, to pretend
 That each encounter is a small piece of that great war?
 As another hero who returns in splendor to find his wife
 Weeping for the imagery of a chiseled stone?

The forest shall resolve itself among the oaks and wings,
 Resolves its shadows into darkness, I mean, so that I am
 No more to yellow jackets than cedars to my core beliefs,
 Whatever they may be when I glance down to see the thorns
 Of yellow jackets pumping the poison of their death in me.
 Core beliefs: In the presence of my autopsy they will find
 I bleed the scent of flowers on which they staggered drunk
 Before they came to sting me deaf and blind.

Yes, I say, in the presence of such a sharp and shapely pain,
 I am alive and moving into the woods, and it is late afternoon,
 And I want to save my kind from its knowledge of this disease
 That marks me human, from the wordless kingdom of bees
 Who love themselves to death among my sacrificial pores.

What We Expect of Our Poets

I'm not sure what I was thinking when you called my name
But it must have been about all the poets who killed
Themselves with alcohol or bridges or back-seat heart attacks

Because I've been thinking about that all week this week.
It's like they have these escape hatches when not enough
People are looking at them, except they don't want anyone

To look at them, really; they want people to look *toward* them
And note their magnificence and eloquence, to stand back
On the streets and let them pass and say: *We are not their equals.*

We want John Berryman to jump. Go on with a half-gainer
That takes our breath away. We want Jim Dickey so drunk
He bleeds vowels at the podium. We want Sylvia Plath to cook

Herself without a flame. But then we say it was a tragedy,
That nothing is worth that madness, and we go forth
In sorrow to counsel all women and men to love themselves

As another, perhaps a benevolent God, would love their souls,
To take failure as a challenge and not worry that love
Has wrecked them as it wrecks us all at the end of the day.

All lies. We want to line the rails of the tropical ship and stomp
And clap for Hart Crane to get on with it, to jump off
The goddamn boat and sink, to be eaten, to rise in a crucifix of bones.

Why I Did Not Answer the Door When You Knocked

The rain is falling this morning my friend.

It is cold and clear and it is not raining.

My cat died last August and we buried him in the yard.

My cat curls into sleep, deeper in the window chair.

You are not really my friend. We have never met.

I would take a bullet for you. This is my promise.

Pine bark beetles have destroyed half my forest.

The density of their shade is absolutely Hansel and Gretel.

A sharp knocking at the door: The home invaders arrive.

The silence of cloisters: The idea is to foil penetration.

That sound is the rain groaning toward lower latitudes.

That sound is pity, the bones that stand us up to break.

Why We're Here

I believe I was born not to judge but to love--Neruda

A regal silence, a splendor: Rooms arrange themselves without us,
Chairs remembering their drivers like war-lost friends.
You come to expect such comparisons, but if truth has a color
It is green. If we were armless, the chairs would have no arms.
If we were legless, the stairs could lose their steps.
I am thinking of a color or a number between one and ten
And the answer is the point Aquinas was trying to make,
That Heisenberg theorized against. The answer is that half
Of any number is its equal, that amber blesses aquamarine
With a touch of their separate spirits. My eyes are brown.
My eyes are blue. My hair is the color of wheat in spring
When the lips of poplar and red oak speak in the wind.

This regal silence, my one friend, is what we might call destiny
Or not as we choose. We believe there is a reason each of us
Sings when snow begins to swell from the lowering grayness,
But maybe there is not. Maybe we are doomed to love
Just as often as we are doomed to judge, but in that moment,
When all the world seems a moving morning, when wind
And sacrifice stand as equals in the notes we learn to play,
A splendor rises. We do not see it coming, and the rush
Of it touches off a serenity that beats gently against the earth.
It shapes us to go out and do something, or nothing, as we will.

Working Among the Mad

He said, "When we die we all go to the moon,
To the black side that is always shaped with shadows,
And we walk around there, but nobody says a word
Because there is no air, and if you emitted a syllable
It would freeze and break and fall to the dust.
But people have to talk, they can't stop, and that dust
Is made of phonemes, check it out, and when you walk
Through it, you'd be able to hear every conversation
That the dead ever had if there was any air and sound
Carried."

Harried,
Tired of working in a place where they shuffle around
Inside their layers of half-delirious contemplation,
Where they come at you preceded only a step by this talk
In a filmy wandering, you see them gathering up their rust.
One or two will have spent the morning tightly trussed.
Their minds are vacuums, but we pretend they're fillable
And that they will think "feathers" when they see a bird,
And that they are outside in their soft delight on meadows,
Knowing that no one arrives too late or leaves too soon.

Album Leaf

Tides are beside the point. The moon
Is at issue in our house tonight,
That herald of gravitational pull
And soliloquies. I lie awake
Next to you. For days I have wished
To make a speech, to break aloe
And drip it in your white palms
With words of impeccable sincerity.
I could include a sequence of metaphors.
Your breath beside me in our bed
Is my sinecure. My space is tenuous
Next to you, a man without Victorian
Guarantees. There are no reserved rights.
I cast upon your steady breath
Moonlight petals, old sanctimonies.
After coffee in the morning, I will
Tell you weather, all the subtle signs
Of pressure building in the Plains.
You will know what I mean:
We heal what is not broken,
We bind what cannot break.

How You Will Recognize Me at the Airport

The miner, having come up from eighteen hundred feet
would wear this mask of soot and blue ice
and that's me in a way, though I have electric heat
back home, where my oldest friends say the face
I wear now doesn't resemble the younger ones
in any special way. The eyes are going. Seamless
bifocals hide this, but the alizarin rope of a staph infection
might be railroading up my arm from the smashed thumb,
you never can tell. I wouldn't make too much of bacteria.

I have scars, one long open-heart track, drainage punctures,
the skull vent from my brother's rock.
I bite my nails, though no longer until they bleed.
I hear music sometimes, don't believe literally in angels
but as an iconographic Byzantine image, all gold foil
and Frisbee halo, they're somewhat like me.

My father was not a miner, either, but he came up
to catch a breath sometimes then dove back down
into the sodden crust of Dante, and I would stand
over that wound and call down to him and ask
how I would know him when he came back up,
and he shouted, faint and full of grand and glowing cheer,
"I'm the one who once looked like you."

So, I can only say I'll be the one holding up no sign
to show you that whatever we become comes from very deep,
from somewhere below us, and that like all love
it is flammable, will burn hard and bright, and will go out.

To Althea in Prison

You slipped the chancel cup away,
Brightest blood it caught that day.
You took the Bible, choir robes, too,
The paint you poured was baby blue.

You and Ricky planned a hoot,
A demolition scheme took root.
And all the stained glass looking down
Slipped from you a heaven's crown.

Ricky said let's tear the place
Apart, I see their stupid faces
Stunned as if the devil crawled
Between the pews and bawled.

You listened well, you nodded twice,
The paint you had was blue as ice.
And you knew which lock to crack
By the sacristy in back.

They caught you seven miles away,
The Bible blue, your feet of clay.
Ricky shrugged, you both were screwed.
The matron watched you clothed, then nude.

Now iron bars make a proper cage
For the guilty in their rage.
And stone walls do a prison make
For Ricky's and for Jesus' sake.

At Home with the Ancients

Her timing could hardly be worse
For Lewis, who cannot believe flight
So effortless. It is the third night
Of their dispute, the home health nurse

Has gone home. She has spoken
Of imbecilities, the common fractures
In marriage and wants no lectures
On what persists or what is broken.

Lewis, there bent up on his bed,
Sees her fabric suitcase quite full
By the door. She's dressed in wool.
He knows the words are in her head.

He thinks of trees among the rain
Of patient stars and all the leaves
That tumble down in gold. He grieves.
Her name was Dorothy or Jane.

Poet, 49, Seeking Response. Serious Replies Only.

"We need to get you more angry before you write poetry again,"
and I took it seriously, cut small strips from my arms, filets,
and considered salt and starvation and the vast terrors

of my century but I pasted all the flesh back and when she
asked what happened I said "Why a bluebird mistook me
for her clot of suet!" and it wasn't a particularly good lie

but I was gone before she could say so. I'm middle-aged,
a softening of the brain may take place around here because
I want to sit in the "arms" of a cedar tree and watch

the grand procession of ants below me as they go forth
from one mound to another carrying their aging queen
on a litter, praising all nature and praising her name.

The Distance Between Fire Ant Mounds

I measure the distance between the fire ant mounds.
I suspect a colonial structure, the distance for outriders
To wander in the full sun. Close enough to gang up
On the British when they come piping up the river valley
With their formal mustaches and cups of Wedgwood.
I cannot scent the pheromone trails, invisible barriers,
Lures that trap a thick-witted mantis on his gawky rounds;
I cannot guess the mounds with lineal queens in birth.

Some mounds have two queens. Some queens have two mounds.
Kick the top away, the workers boil, build back their domes,
Their Hatshepsut chambers. They do not leave their own mound
To look for armies of the sun, equidistant cities by the road;
The stunned soldiers move a feeble foot away, fumble for fire,
Villain, that accidental gait of cow or boy. But nothing's there.

My neighbor's house is through the woods, and I see his dogs
Sometimes, Australian blue hounds that sniff out stones,
Or I wave at dusk in the shadow of long-leaf pines, and his hand
Rises back, but he comes no closer. There is no path in those woods.

Apple Head

A shrunken head sits in the dwelling's light,
Apple wizened with the juice removed,
A woman's face that's turning toward the night,
She's probably a Gypsy or a Finn.

They carve up apples, aiming for a face
That's tired of living, seen the empty world
In all its truth. (Time can raise her mace
And crush us sleeping where we've curled.)

Smell her apple cheeks, the faint allure
Of orchards or the sneering march of truth.
Trace her toothless gums where nothing pure
Is mumbled. Point her toward enduring north.

Her brain is only seeds, a dormant cluster
Thick behind her eyes. Seeds delight
In memories of sun and April's musty
Rain-soaked earth. That look of fright

Came later, when she fell upon the ground
Where bees wove lanes among the ripened smell
Of easy rot. A sigh blew out, the sound
Of seasons changing, metal, like a bell.

Woman of the apples, we salute
Your shrunken head. Nothing's old or new
In the grove that's filled again with troops
That come for us, a Gentile and a Jew.

Around and Back, Around and Back

When I think of the circular scheme, the nipples pierced
with loops of steel, when I lap up old phonemes
and Froot Loops as my morning cereal and slurp milk,

I want to go ahead and reveal that circular schemes come back
to their beginning point, which means they never left,
like Dorothy lying in her narrow Kansas bed, all bad dreams

and remembrance. Twirl. A step backward in the street
toward bed, and suddenly I'm twelve and dreaming
Wagner rings and hula hoops and the Os in the word notebook,

or I'm in my early thirties drunk at a party with quoits
and leaning for a fey toss. I shudder up from sleep
to find my overseas cap snugged down on the crust of brow

we're about ready to ship out for the South Pacific
and this war is like all the other wars, a return
of blood upon the soil, a sacrifice like the "okay" sign,

thumb and finger rolled around and three fingers high.

Merry-go-round, the barrel of a semi-automatic gun
the calyx and petals of something fresher in our spring

an areola with pores up all around.

The Ashes of the Dead

I'd like to sift them for evidence of laughter
 (the whoopie cushion good cheer of some night
in summer when the boys were all pinked up

with champagne or some supposedly wild victory),
 for the shape of fingers and teeth and memory,
because memory has a shape and color, though each

one changes, some kid's sun-shot kaleidoscope days.

 I would read them like voodoo chicken bones,
mix up a batch with water or cold wine and write

sonnets to see if love dripped down the page or fear
 at the last disease or perhaps just some passing
anger that turned his cheeks pale with old rage.

I'd like to take the entire brass jar and heave up
 the old man's shape into sharp cold-front winds
that roared past on the night of his last birthday.

**John Jacob Astor's Speech on the Arrival in Heaven
Of Other Victims of Death by Drowning**

I was there when the bow went down,
Sucker-punched by those noble obligations
Of class and comfort. Above all others
I understand your distress. You breathed
Air one last time, that weightless, vindictive
Air, and bobbed about beneath the surface,
Keel cracked, rudder falling down a mile
From your left foot. Or you held a spar
And drifted downwind a nautical mile.
You froze. Your legs grew plankton flagellae.
I was exemplary in my nighttime bath,
Chin-up among the screaming hundreds
From steerage. You became a small myth
Like Hart Crane who said goodbye and took
A plunge into the fluffy, warm stern-wake
Of the Caribbean. I forgive your sad panic,
The idea that the world was all ocean bed.
A death at sea is quite the same as life
On land. That is the mystery of our dive.
We consumed that brine, were never seen again.

Astronomy Lesson

Megan looks at stars, and she says they are one inch apart,
Maybe even less, and they blink if you do not stare.
What's in between? Nothing. That's the nothing part
Of the sky, the what's-between of stars, so you cannot worry
About it. There are the blinking star-parts and the nothing parts,
And some nights there are no stars, just nothings or clouds
Hung low, a bunting draped from the trees in our front yard.
Megan knows all this, six and certain, asks if there's another
Thing I want to know? What do the stars taste like?
Oh, some are vanilla and some are chocolate, but most
Are vanilla, anybody could tell that. Stick out your tongue
And lap them off the sky I say, and she tries it, laughing,
And says they taste like nothing or maybe vanilla. Daddy,
You taste them, too. So I lick the belt off Orion, and it seems
Spring-damp, like moss or the first days of a new season.
What do stars smell like? Megan stands on tiptoes to inhale
The aroma of Sirius, and she nods with all authority and says
The stars smell like flowers a long way from home.
Daddy, you smell them, too. I inhale grass and honeysuckle
And the fluff of Andromeda, but mostly I smell Megan's hair
Fresh from the shower's spring storm. What do stars sound like?
Megan turns her head twice, brushes back the damp curls
From her ears to listen. Well, stars sound like the wind sounds
When you are curled up and almost ready for sleep.
I listen, and I hear the fresh motion of leaves above us,
Dancing with a breath from very far away, from Canada.
And what do stars feel like? She sweeps her hand to grasp
A constellation, looks into that soft palm. It takes more
To light me up than stars, she says; you catch some
For your room, and when you lie down, you will not be afraid.

Back in This World

I'm listening to Debussy
it's not quite five-thirty in the morning
and it occurs to me that in January
the butterflies are all used up,
worn out and somewhere far south
in the tropics where the sun's still out
I dreamed all night in my chrysalis
of wound sheets and pillows
that freedom pulled me,
meaning the Great American West
or death, I couldn't tell which.
It doesn't matter, because I came up
in the same cold season
where veins of frost bleed against the glass
of my truck as soon as the sun
comes out.

A Barn on U.S. 441

Old man, teeth kicked out by rot and storms,
Board-blind and creaking at a single finger-touch,
I recall your glory. *See Rock City* had been spread
Upon your tin roof. The gray planks held out rain
Or wind, barely shuddered in a summer thunderstorm.
You enclosed the yeasty scent of hay, cattle eyes
Looking out at the snowfields, at that new landscape
Which came upon them in the silence of a night.
Your loft-doors swung back, ducks sang comic arias
For your pleasure, the weeds fell back at your majesty.
The tin blew far, the planking broke off knot by knot.
The farmers died, every one of them who once drove
Tractors up and down your road. They cattle took
Their lowing to another field, and only shreds of hay
Were left in patches where the sun angled through you.
One wall is near its time to drop down in the grass.
You are not sentient, do not hear me or feel my hand
Smooth your long, splintered graying pine, but here I am
Anyway, in my overalls, speaking of those older fields.
I pretend spring is near. But I, too, am tired of the plowing.
I am a poor translator. Maybe you should speak for me.
Falling down is not the worse thing on this Earth.

Catching the Bat

The cats sensed its inelegant flap first,
Began to leap and clap their clawless paws,
Missed the circular path. My wife jumped up;
Our daughter screamed from her bed that
Bats will weave your hair, cast rabies
Among your kin. I ducked and bobbed past
The orbit and saw the tiny bright eyes
In a spoonful of fur and called my wife to get
Me something to knock it down, but first
She took the cats and locked them up
In the bedroom and brought me a butterfly net.

The small mesh was child's play, Megan's toy
For April afternoons when the swallowtails
Come back, the ones she's never caught. I swung
At the bat, and it chattered in radio static,
Fled up the stairs and lay shivering in a step corner.
I held the net over it, nudged it with the poker
From our fireplace; it would not look at me or move.
I touched the bat once again, and it burst toward me
With windmill wings and flew back into the den.
I went after it, old arms pumping up like Ruth's
At each pass, swinging the net, swinging the net.

My wife lay beside our child to tell her bats
Will not harm her. I felt my own slow circle
Around that room, the lost navigator of a hunt,
Raised my arm one last time and swung the net
Across the path and snagged the crying bony wings
And put it outside. And I heard the cricket praise,
Sopwith Camels heading upstairs for a show,
Heard the soft thump of the dumped bat and knew
That net was my shroud, that my own singing
And flying days will end in far less glory,
That nothing far below will catch me as I fall.

The Carpenter Bees

My house is suddenly sweet, the chocolate eaves,
The brandied joists, a feast of front porch swings.

They drill the xylem, spit the shavings out
In delicate conical piles on the back deck

Where my daughter plays and doodles in the dust
They leave. I hear them drilling afternoons.

Do they find the treasures I have laid for them
As they hum the sun back down into its cave?

I think not. They go an inch then stop and lay
Their eggs or quit and die. Their kingdom runs

Its course and falls away into pride and ruin.
I find them dead upon the grass and I say

They have tasted what I built and found it full
Of bitterness. They have tasted what sustains

Us both. They know it does not remain, does not grow,
Does not shelter us. We are both making dust.

Last Things

What would you like to do before you die,
he asked, well, I'd play Mozart left-handed on the flute,
I'd paint an apple you could lift from the canvas and eat
on an April afternoon down to its bitter seeds
I'd do hand-stands down Broadway
I'd break the land speed record for snail-drawn vehicles
I'd have less dignity in my life and ride
an old but steady mare down some Apache gulch
I'd sign a law to outlaw all spandex
I'd sip a mug of toasted rum in a daughter's December,
I'd learn to purr,
I'd whisper Whitman to the elm tree by my front door
and see if it grew expansive, gave me vast shade,
I'd invent the universal stain remover and use it on
the genocides of my own century, blotting up monsters
so they could not gas the trembling young women
I'd find the highest spot in the Rockies and play Richard Strauss
until my old heart spilled out and froze all over again

Belladonna

They proved the elegance of that escape
With paintings to shake all delights
From the eye. An over-bred boy sprawled
Across a bed, the bottle just past
Fingers still pink and full. I asked
A pathologist, and he said no dice.
The convulsions would pull him into
The fetal position, skin quite cyanotic
By the time the police and painters arrived.

Romance demands its confused whisper.
John the Baker, now near eighty-seven,
Proves that age does not share wisdom,
Therefore let them crack the label open
On the bottle and hold their ground.
Years later, in the rainfall-dampened
Clutter of cobblestones and hurrying
To the theatre, one will bring back
An echo of the days before the fear

Became real. He will see within
A lamplit December window bare
room, the pale cadaverous stare
Of a poet, or one would be seen
Through the bubbled windows of London
As artistic and therefore not afraid.
He will pull the watch up by links
Bent from gold. He hurries onward.
At eight, the doors will close.

Easter Sunday

I killed the bug that shared our blood,
Smashed it on the window glass
In one two-inch-long smear of dark red.
I was driving in my truck when the insect lit
On my neck and drank, sipped a vein
Right up its needle-straw. I slapped
And swerved, and then it whined, droned
Around the cab without a flight plan,
Loops and one Immelman, then a landing
On the calm lake of the driver's window
Where I palmed it. We died there.
The living cells broke down. Cantilevered
Legs hung tight against the pane.
Those fingers wove just air upon their loom.
I cannot say, three full days since,
Just who has died for whom.

Putting Up Bluebird Houses

No one can protect you now
From the intimacy of my size,
Or crumble up the days as I have
For you in a cedar cell.

The world is not that various.
Species diverge so slightly, scales
Of the first precision will not grant
You that blessed old sinecure.

One home may be no worse
Than the next. One day with sun
Streaming along the sills can hold
The eloquent victory of new days.

Inside, where you will nest,
Bear young, watch the fireflies
Pour over an evening in August,
I rest in all the shapes you fill.

In Praise of My Bones

1.

Rise up with me, old-horse sway,
And let us roam the bored ligaments
And tendons with a perfect gratitude.
Each new year my shortening shadow
Distracts me. This buckled spine
Compressed for daisies, my small child,
For the brave and stupid leap on rocks
Across the creek. Fingers burn on out
With the cold. A rib rolls me up
From bed with its calcified edge.
Well, so what? I beat in that cage
The same song of lovely escapes
And excuses used in old summer.
I rub the rock in my arm, burnish
Off the jawbone until it's jewel and shine.
I ask these cervical vertebrae to bear
The weight of dog straw and beer.
I send those dry bones dancing
When they hurt to rise or turn at all.
I know of moons to suck the marrow
Out and leave me marimba-empty,
Stock figures still against all skies.

2.

Be considerate. See these forelegs
Unfit for flight or the swift circus
Of quadrupeds and do not mourn.
Beneath all my appearing skins, shell
Holds me up, a dog-gnawed hunk
Of regret and calcium. Be wise.
My bone enfolds your back, white
In white, a tug of brittle ulna
On your spine. I want to feel
The excavators's trowel at my wrist,

My heel bent back in the ornaments
Of burial. Build the museum above
Me, tomb of the unknown country man
Who had these walking sticks to spare.
Be patient. All of us will come to rest.
All of us will come apart. I choose
The glory of that distance, home to home,
To celebrate what reaches me,
What I can touch with my bones.

The Women of Bosnia

They have shamed us. Our men are gone.
They shot a mother dead. She lay all blood.
My child was taken by a shell. The piece was small.
She had no gown. We buried her in cotton.
They have shamed me. Do not look upon me.
My husband played piano. He is missing.
And old bent woman weeps. We hold her.
The shells came on in. My daughter died.
We are herded into buses. Birds are here.
Our men are gone. They never shamed us.
We cannot wait. We fear the darkness.
Her son cries for milk. Her cow is shot.
This was our home. We are leaving it.
Razija died on Tuesday. Her man is gone.
We buried Razija in dirt. We had no coffin.
The children starve. We hear the planes.
Our men are gone. Do not look upon me.

Camping with My Brother

I have resigned myself to the shape of moons.
That night not far from Rocky Island
We circled stones and build for penitence
A small fire from the fallen pine limbs.
I was the sacrifice. My arms fell back
Around the heat. I would not go down
That slope toward the creek for monsters,
Snakes, shadows all lived there and conspired
To fold me up. That jungle hammock
From War Surplus held off dew or rain
And let in light from the quiet fire
I saw in my hands, held them to my face.
I was the sacrifice to shadows, younger
Than my brother, the smallest one along,
And I heard the plot of briar and creek.
Vague destinations, the splendid tall tales
Of failure or girls aroused me, eyes up
On the netting of the stars. Now all
Lunar shapes shake my common bed alive
With memorable regards for the roses.
The Cherokee roses were already in bloom.

Poem for Sam

The cat who loves me doesn't know
That someday we will lie down dead
Beneath the sunny days, the snow.
A slope of moss will be our bed.

He doesn't know from my caressing
How I suffer in my mind.
I see no sense in my professing
That we cannot catch the wind.

He grooms my wrist, becomes a purr,
He leans his whiskers on my heart.
He pities me; I have no fur.
My claws would not even start

To be useful in a fight.
No matter. We will find
The clock, a kind and loving friend.
And he alone will taste the wind.

The Change

The old woman in the green bathing suit
Has begun to change before our eyes.
She is pensive. A few scales arise,
Plate armor. Her long life hints
She has seen reptiles, visited India
On a group discount. She suffers
For us in this seaside pool,
Face growing longer, nails to claws.
We are her natural prey. She fins
Up the water, taking all the children
One by one into her eyes. Alone
And growing old, she is capable of bringing
Her sacrifice public, with no pretense
That her adolescent skin will return.
By night, her eyes could glow red
In the tropical shrubbery
Where she waits for all of us,
As we pass inevitably by.

For the Children of Insane Fathers and Mothers

1.

He came up the stairs
To your room, the sea foaming on his lips
The way it looked at Rossing Beach
And you climbed off your bed
And said, "Daddy?" and backed into the circus
Print. He wept. He said he could not sleep.
The sirens go off all night long,
The pulsing lights are coming for him
And his thoughts are being sent
By special circuits in that wave-length.
You said, "Daddy?" and he hushed you
And said, "Can you not hear it, Emma?
Don't you hear the children crying out
For me to lie down beneath the wheels?"
He stayed in your room for six hours
Whispering. You had just turned eight.

2.

The recreation room was full of girls
And boys just like you. They watched doors
For their mothers, for the sick one to come out
With sweet regrets to say it was all an act,
Another tickle in the storybook night.
Someone was screaming back there.
Several cried so hard their heads might fall off
But the doctors hold their heads on,
That's what one boy said to the others.
They put a bandage on their heads and send
A shock in through their eyeballs.
They will come back, but they are not the same.

3.

You will never trust the sun again.
It may or may not rise from the pity of a night
And you will not trust words again.

Life will be only what someone else can take away
From you. You will be given nothing.
You will earn nothing. He will come home,
Leave again, speak too softly for you to hear
That he is removing from what's left of your heart.

4.

He said, "Emma, listen to that! Have you ever
Heard a thing more beautiful, girl? Tell me!"
You said, "I don't hear anything." He cocked
His head and smiled only through his eyes
And whispered, "I will. I will. Yes, I will come."
And you said, "I don't hear anything! I don't!"

5.

Years might pass. You are grown. A new medicine
Has been discovered, they say, but it will not
Give you back the coral delights of the sea,
The comfort of your canopy bed, the new dress
That made you feel more special than a Sunday
Morning. You have never loved your husband.

Circular

When I think of the circular scheme, the nipples pierced
with loops of steel, when I lap up old phonemes
and Froot Loops as my morning cereal and slurp milk,

I want to go ahead and reveal that circular schemes come back
to their beginning point, which means they never left,
like Dorothy lying in her narrow Kansas bed, all bad dreams

and remembrance. Twirl. A step backward in the street
toward bed, and suddenly I'm twelve and dreaming
Wagner rings and hula hoops and the Os in the word notebook,

or I'm in my early thirties drunk at a party with quoits
and leaning for a fey toss. I shudder up from sleep
to find my overseas cap snugged down on the crust of brow

we're about ready to ship out for the South Pacific
and this war is like all the other wars, a return
of blood upon the soil, a sacrifice like the "okay" sign,

thumb and finger rolled around and three fingers high.

Sancta Civitas

A great blue heron has become its bones
Two days past, the holy city of ants and their priests.
Feathers loosen in their pores, cool blanket
On the sunken breast, the crook of her leg,
And I watch a puff of March make her move.

This dark wingspan three days' past sliced
Over southern ponds, roadways, the small house
Up the road where Mrs. Moore has lost her name.
Morning has its claims. The vultures come near
For these ceremonies, for eternal feasts.

These awkward bones do not await my hands.
I have no voice in this sinecure of old gravities,
And I cannot mourn. A heron in that falling death
Is no heron, just shape and memory of color
And a pyre for beetles and the evening beasts.

I trust she died wingward in a glance of sun
And season, past the house where Mr. Moore
Tells Hannah that her name is written on the air.
Hannah loved the herons in their standing stillness.
She wove five fingers, watching, in her hair.

The highest limbs are greening now, making canopies
For this heron and her kind. In the earth's core
Are other cities in the shape of names and heron bones.
They fall into their rising, know that I have seen them soar.
I bring new feathers and a name for Mrs. Moore.

Coffins

Out there in the heartland, the dead
Go on growing hair and fingernails
As if the forces of mycology might visit
And groom them for a wedding day:
All is well. Except the chemicals
Used for burial are noxious to fungi,
And the ritual worms can't get in.
The dead have their pastures. We tend
The grass, give it a Sunday trim.
A resurrection of these unkempt beasts
Would scare us into atheism,
Make us ask for crematoria,
So we will not approach heaven
With the claws we have grown,
With hair down to our hearts.

A Change of Weather

The cold front has blown through in the night,
And stars are spilled up there in the curving morning
Where astronomical glories paint themselves
Into myth. I feel cheerful and bristly, light-stepping
Outside before the first eastern streaks. The moon
Has fled, and I do not mind the disgust of my dreams,
The soured deadfall of yet another schooldesk scenario
Where I had gone back for courses somehow missed.
The wind, still brisk as a broom, teaches me to dance!

The leaves of old autumn whisk up, then settle back
Into their breaking; an owl plays his clarinet note
One last time, a mourning dove flutes from the creek.
The pawprints of a dozen raccoons, where they washed
Their food in the dark wind, lead me back to trees.
The elm beside my front porch shivers. A plump squirrel
Watches me. I could leave my prints against the sky.
I am insignificant, unwatched. I lean down to touch
The pilgrim grass. I do not notice I have died.

Colorado Folk Tale

The aspens were about to change colors.
Lime to gold, bullet to blood, adrift.
An old man lived in the Airstream trailer
On twenty-seven acres without water.
He took *TV Guide* and *Soldier of Fortune*,
Lost a finger in a John Deere baling machine.
The aspen leaves fell upon the silver hull,
Little scratchy taps. Soon, a snowstorm
Came up over Hahn's Peak. The old man
Cut another fingertip off to write a name
In the pale sheet of meadow. She had
Left him for a feed salesman in Denver.
They were happy. Six crows came down
And landed on his back that day.
Snow melted, not time yet to turn
The crevasses to cotton balls, uncertain
Seasons. *He had no middle name.*

Speaking to A Comp Lit Class

I can read a little French left over from college.
Some German phrases, the Latin of the mass.
The air in here feels like a suspension of ether and oil,
Slow, accusing me of schoolyard boasts.
What the hell: I am a translation myself,
Anglo-Eastern European or something
Like that, family lines in every direction,
Axons, synapses firing up, fading to echoes.
I am Southern born, and all my vowels
Are bent double, unintelligible to your
Average Frenchman. I could pretend to know
A Slavic alphabet, a variant of Congolese,
Kurdish, Mongolian Derivative A.
I tell them nothing in my native tongue
They have not heard many times before.
I am one proper noun in a single language,
Meaning one who cannot speak, a mute.

Five Couplets

1.
I'd like to go in perfect squares
Still lifes, victims and pink bears.
2.
Bears with gum can wait and think.
The gum is cinnamon and pink.
3.
Square can moves in circles. Stand
Back and any murder's rather grand.
4.
Bears can chew a hot and living heart,
Not murder, just another body part.
5.
Still Life with Bear (and light by Vermeer).
All the victims bow and shed a tear.

On Reaching Age 50

The airplane of this life has crashed and I am alive!
I walk away from the screams and compass failures
Like a man in a shroud of light. My feet just barely
Reach the grass with its tender intentions, scarcely
Dance out of the wreckage. I believe in horizons now
Because there is one behind me. I am flame, don't burn,
Point the way toward the still-falling calendar leaves.

What will become of us? We will grow our summer
Beans and put them up in Mason jars, add lines
To the spilling leaves of family Bibles, keep watching
The significant peeling of our days. We will phone
Those we love or write them incunabula, sing of mothers
Who steered us out of sheared metal and decline.
We will walk away from the cut and humped-up flowers.

I will tend your garden if your will attend to mine.
We will banish all impersonal moments when we speak
To each other. Conversation will become of us
In the early mornings still abed with no nightmares
And an armful of smoothed sheets. A deep drink
From our aquifer will become of us, the coldest
Stream beneath this final tree-hung home.

I walk away from this century with a nodding heart.
I have survived the coronary color of roses again
This morning, and I call my name over and over now
From the back porch, and no one hears it, and I do not care.
Children will become of us, our voices in their memory,
And they will never cry for this bundle of old ashes
I have become or understand my joy in their laughter.

Solving the Crime

My great-uncle John died on Christmas Day
Of 1888. They say a tree limb fell
On his head as he hunted for squirrels.
I don't buy it. The conspiracy lasted,
I'm guessing, until after the Second World War,
When the final one groaned, sat up
To confess and dropped back dead.
I can prove a deliberate skull crack,
Show the details in my own blood.
It had rained. Footprints (I'm sure)
Were everywhere, went back to Seneca
Or toward the Pickens County line.
The evidence will show my great-uncle's gun
Was never fired that day. I can
Suppose that John was an innocent boy
Who loved his mother, who knew
Those who had come for him.
The limb was too small, the branch too low
To have that crushing force. Blood
Misted all the wild holly leaves.
When my the tests come back, I will
Present what should be so obvious:
The men arranged for Christmas Day to fall
On the very morning that John Williams died.

Playing Croquet at Night

At first, you see the wickets, feet in grass.
They mark a road that has no lanes.
But in the windy swish of lilies, all light
Evaporates up the highest tulip tree.
We're laughing. Your shot slips off course,
Moves down toward the creek, perfect rock
Rolling over beetles and their splayed friends,
The skinks. While you turn, I move both posts
Into another country, one a genteel monarchy,
The other steam-bound, bugs and prayers.
Now you have no destination. Then I stare
At the absence of your ball, and you position
All the wickets in a vast fairy ring upon the lawn.
We're always coming back around in darkness.

Awakening in the Dark

Another morning before the light comes.
My dog is asleep in the dark basement.
She has had dark dreams before.
I held her in a towel last night and we watched
"Lonesome Dove," and she dreamed of cattle drives,
comancheros, attacks in the lack of light.
I dreamed of this small beagle lost in the woods
not far from America's vast prairie,
and it was a heavy darkness she had never known
before, and I was calling her name, and Robert Duvall
came out laughing and holding her. And he whispered
that we are born into a peculiar kind of light
that never comes again, and we spend most of our time
wandering around and banging into things
Until we awaken one morning and know it.

Depression

Don't get me started again on the birth
Of doubt. All right then. First a belief
Serves its practicum as a constellation
Seen only when the fires are all put out.
Then it finds a hand. Ten thousand men
Work for forty years on the arches.
Something goes wrong with the new wine,
A slight reminiscence of vinegar. A moon
Through the stained glass throws unexpected
Shadows on the slab of floor. Now.
A war starts. Shells destroy fully half
Of the tower and the rectory, an old man
Prophesizes that a tablet will be found
Which clarifies the British, the Rosicrucians.
Nothing will happen as we believe it will,
Then we call it an enlightenment,
Make a category to fit phenomenology.
Okay. Tell the children to believe
The very clear impossibilities, to ditch
Pragmatics and start to clear the land.
Tell them they will always be afraid.

Now, What Seems to Be Your Problem?

1.

I have been coughing for several days, sternum-hacking,
And I do not like the looks of my eyes. My kidneys hurt.

At night now I dream of women in their regal glow
Passing beneath my window in their heels and sashes,

But that's no big deal, is it? A pain beneath my last rib --
That's nothing to fool with, could be a rare granuloma

Or maybe it is the male cramps, the monthly agony
Of fear that sweats up me like slow-crawling rage.

I have been "sick at heart" over words. I have violated
A confidence, revealed how the allergist betrays us

With his pinpricks, teasing skin into a flustered red.
I cry too easily these days, head north, turn around,

But that's probably not significant. I am sure, quite sure,
That in the waiting room I heard someone speak my name.

2.

I have been drunk three times this week. This is not good.
I feel the skeleton dragging me along the parking lot

Toward work, reluctant to stand, bojangling with tendons
As if they might strike, lie down by the fifth-floor elevator.

But that's nothing, is it, doctor? I want assurances that I
Will come back like the tide, the same but maybe different,

Twice a day for years more, in green decades on the foam
Of belief, where nothing breaks down, and there is no rain.

Dog Dreaming on the Couch

This is the perfect scene: She turns in sun
To see a slowing rabbit make the ridge
And wait. That scent is stronger than
Any other blood, high and quite lovely.

Or that hare has gone green, and the air swims
With hints of hoof and slow feathers,
So she rears up, nose high, teeth back
In dog's gracious and submissive smile.

Awake, she'd be seizing, brain skipping beats
Among the char of napping old age,
But on her side, feet beating in the air,
She swims through old sun and distant cries.

Her neck hair rises up in paint-brush bristles.
She senses quadrupedal pawsteps coming
Down the slope toward her yard, braces down,
Coughs her sentinel *mrf* to warn it off.

Or perhaps she has dreamed the death's call
Of thunder, and now she is circling, coming back
To call my name, saying one of us must stand
Silently to save the other, howl against the darkness.

Walking My Dogs

We go nowhere in particular, dirt roads,
Creek paths, wandering like senile kings
In Nineteenth Century Europe, slowed by gout
And baronial affairs. A clear direction
Would help me draw a map
Of Sunday's continental divide.
I may follow steadily on the track-line
And pretend the destination is a glade
Where cats linger for the chase, grass
Sweet and thick awaits a lazy chewing.
But I am less intentional than they know.
I miss turn-offs these days, forget
To stop at the post office, for milk
And bread, for beer. They could
Lead me back into my childhood. I might
Trip upon my summer cleats and fall
Down laughing, to be washed by tongues
That drag across my slower feet
The damp, pink syllables of love.

The Doughboy Statue on the Square in Madison, Georgia

Once a year at midnight, boys will say, he puts
Down the rifle, breaks off the pedestal and dashes
Off to get drunk and laid. He thinks he knows the way
To Paris; he's been there twice before. He stops
To tighten up his puttees, tie the marbled boots,
Adjust the flat-brim helmet slantwise over one eye.
He thinks the ladies hereabouts are swell, but strays
Toward country where the muddy roads will lead
Him to the mademoiselles. It is dark, but moon's enough
To take a Camel up if one's half-crazy or had Pernod
For hours in the mess. The birds that rest on him --
That's getting old. He'd rather lie in muck and wait
For Old Fritz to rush up from his trenches, toss a can
Of gas -- anything but waiting at the courthouse year
By year, but so it goes. They won't miss him for tonight.
His thick stone boots half-dance down the country lane
In darkness. He listens for his orders in the darkness.

The Dream Marriage

I will follow anyone to sleep,
Not fond of my own footsteps
Or where I go. I will follow you
To a floating cottage so deep

In the woods no one can find it
Even with a map. I will map it,
Come back and find you gone.
You will look back and admit

I ran you off, raised a new dream,
The one of nakedness in the street
And no one laughing as you walked.
You will go to a speaking stream

Where animals lie in their distress
And beg for help from that hunter
On another night. They will tell you
Not to give me their new address.

I want to skip my own rotting life
And live yours, dream your past,
Come into the pasture through your gate.
I am asking you to be the wife

Of my night-time sorrow, and our girl
Will be a tiny child with filmy wings.
I am asking you to hold me in your eyes
Until the darkness bears our rings.

Edisto

The sun comes out of the ocean this morning
A benign yellow, not red, and I think of how
I love the solitude of shell and wave-break,
The smooth arc of bent sea oats always
Pointing from the sea, toward land.

The thunder came all night, magnificent blows
Against the pelican delight of evening. I lay
In bed wondering if the tropical spikes
And undergrowth surveyed that stratocumulus
With pleasure. But no. Like me, they rise,

They move when wind comes, they mature,
They bear their seed. Some days I could curl
Inside a conch, finding ever-narrower passages
Where old men hide. They listen for the sea,
Feel a child press it to her ear, hopeful

That the sound of oceans may be inside.
And so I am sad to reach the sure place
Where fear no longer rides me hard, where
I once came across the crest of white-caps
And could rise as liquid, or as a stone.

Epiphany

You said you wanted to have an epiphany this weekend
and I give you Bob, the Wonder Dog, who will bark
the number of syllables in your name without knowing who you are.

Bob will turn a tight circle on his hind legs for a soft bone
and you can pretend that circles mean God,
at least circles mean God more than squares mean God,

for what very sacred could escape into four dank corners?

That's the kind of thing you must consider when approaching
epiphanies, though it would help to have a guide like Virgil

through hell, and so I was thinking Bob might find you lost in thought
and speak you with his black pupils and a curled wag
and suddenly he's calling out a name you thought

was already erased and gone from the face of this earth.

Meritable Facts About the Square of the Hypotenuse

Bleed is blood, and art is paint, words are books,
And ants are colonies in their grainy red Alps.

Grass is lawn, and weeds are woods, words are operas,
And La Scala was the mortar of old Verdi's plan.

Henry James goes on, and Ray Carver stops, words are alarms,
And dogs are their voices on clear windy nights.

Hand is holding, and sun is sweat, words are sex,
And Isaac Stern saved Carnegie Hall and then played.

Trees are leaves, and cats are tongues, words are death,
And birds are temples in the sinecure of their wings.

Sky is clouds, and art is light, words are just words,
And Lenny Bernstein smiled, then smoked himself to death.

Fading

The Phil of five minutes past
is gone, let that bastard out of here
 because he goes off in all directions
 at once, and what to make of that

You remember the time he tried gentle
gentle didn't work with me for any time
 at all, so he tried stone masonry work
 in the back yard, but the wall fell

He has a different light, stands in a different
light, and he's thrown away all his words
 like a broken-up set of socket wrenches
 that don't fit tool or nut any more,

well, that's not much of a tragedy, he agrees,
but past is past, the aspirin he took five minutes
 ago is no more recent than the boy king
 entombed in splendor just after his birthday.

Falling in Love

so I'm heading out to the open sea
with its glass of jewels
an opera where the lovers kill King Mark
 and starting kissing first
then think how a water spout is
the orgasm of shallow water
 and all this sexual tension breaks
over the port gunnels
but then I realize I've gone on alone
and that the Sighing Clams know my name
 and make a big deal over international waters,
nudge me out there farther so they can rat me out

I could just rub the glow from that water
and damp it down so far the sad sun
 would follow me, dull as pewter

I Feel Fine and Can't Say Why

Tell me what is very fine
oh yes, very fine
and I will dance around your swaying spine

Tell me what will flame, endure
oh yes, endure
and I will show you erasure

The world is choreographed
oh yes, I have to laugh
the woman wheat, the man is chaff

But all in all I'll take the rose
oh yes, the blanket snows
and I will have to go

And I will never go

Alone At the Fireside

I like reading alone, maybe listening to some French music
in place of cigarettes, in place of kind Jeanne,
the girl I never met during the Resistance when we held
our breaths in the hidden room as Nazis broke up
the furniture, including a gilt Louis XVI armoire
on which I had left the plans for the invitation;

but anyway, love is long! Love is a fireside book
where I stare into the low flames and remember
the last time I saw Jeanne, she was in a nursing home
and thought the underground was an English subway
and she looked at me with unspecified eyes and shook
her eyes at me like a spaniel flinging off spring rain.

Well, love fades. That's the lesson in front of this screen
where I'm alone tonight, and I remember what else I left
on that armoire with the invasion plans, it was the letter
I had written brave Chloe as she faced the firing squad
in the suburbs where the jackboots stomped our choruses
of a little-known Offenbach processional hymns. A virgin.

I like reading along and there's a kind of glory
in being old and being hanged by some Gestapo disease
in the bedroom where memory goes first and you lay
it down between the pages of a book you never read
and kingdoms fall before your feet, and she is sitting there
with her arms out, saying all things will finally be all right.

Fishing at Grayson White's

I cast the line far out, away from reel
And hand, the configurations of delight
Apparent in musculature, the whispering
Horizon, one small splash out there.
I grieve for water. Clouds spread east
Across the surface, green and patient
For a breeze. Bream come up toward me.
I lay across the delicacies of that surface
And drift out into the lake with birds
Low and skimming small familiar ripples.
I could sink toward hydrilla and childhood.
I could spread my fins like wet sails,
Get caught by eddies, pushed on south
Toward the dam. I could exhale geese.
At the end of discovery is the fair beginning
Of another cast. I make that old motion
With its splendid spell, its dying arch.
I find that I am caught on this edge
Of sand and water, taut against the lines.
I find consolation. I rise to the light.

Fish Man

Ichthyologists cannot agree
On genus, species, or hollandaise.
They measure fins, the fickle gill;
They named the Salton Sea.

Instead of scales, taxonomy
Delights them so. Ancient teeth
Show up among the Amazon species,
Enamel's last astronomy.

They rush me from the beach
To a hidden place. They mark
My pectoral cross with dyes.
I escape their measured reach.

I have not lived in brine
At least a million stone-limbed years.
My shell's a calcareous den
Without a sound or a sign.

And yet they talk at leisure
Of my unprotected skin, my fat content.
They see here that the arch of time
Is such a pointless measure.

Then they photograph my arms.
They publish all their scholarship
In German. I am now a specimen
Of their bathyspheric charms.

How Everything Fits

1.
On morphine a plate of shoelaces might be terrifying.
2.
Not meaning the shoelaces are on morphine but that you are.
3.
Why you should be on morphine is all shroud to me, fog.
4.
Perhaps it's a compound fracture of the tibia from an accident.
5.
Or you have a short time left from some frontal cancerous attack.
6.
I meant to say *me*, not *you*, I have never met you, can't see faces.
7.
Or maybe the shoelaces have soaked in morphine and now writhe.
8.
They hold up the clamped tips and say this is where it all ends.
9.
A Wedgwood serving bowl of shoelaces. A soup cup of rusted rivets.
10.
You lack context, and I'll decide what to do with you some time later.

Floating Downstream

The current feels strong today around my ankles,
Just as in the Battle of the Wilderness
Men died lost, shot, burned in wildfires.
Shostakovitch confessed to stay alive.
I catch myself sometimes like a dried leaf
Twirling against the quartzite shoals
Waiting to move, or for the shadow of rain.
I want to be lifted by an unconceived force
Toward the river, to be broken swiftly
Out of these eddies, this undirected gunfire,
This slow movement. I want a great theme.
I want to confess, to find myself empty
And rushing home, meaning out to sea.

The Fish Fossil

A private joke in the geology of shale,
Rock-fin, open eye, dorsal up, mouth down.
This bronzed relief shows spine segments,
A curvature of the ribs, the teeth sharp
And carnivorous, ready to snap shut
On some Mesozoic bait fish when it sank
And settled in the warm and thickened mud.
Unlike Michelangelo's Slave, it does not
think of escape or struggle up from
Marble to break the light again.
Its display of comfort and poise makes
Me think of Lenin in his cold mausoleum,
Impersonal, with no presence or meaning.

Remembrance of Things Future

Child in my Sunday morning lap,
I present to you the flying car,
Hologram Monopoly. Baltic Avenue's
Gone. A casino took its space
On the board, our presidents are clay
And you saw it all coming.
Time is flies, gnats, the shelled
World stripped down to a pea-sized
Gulp of magma. Where's the dignity?

I never saw a thing more beautiful
Than your fingers in the soft holes
Of that afghan. Your own daughter
Will laugh at such a love of bed-yarn,
And you can repeat the day we saw
The future in that absence. You
Were watching *Fantasia* in my arms
And I reached around to write my
Shapeless undying love on your smile.

Facing Genocide

Today I'd like to focus on the use of Sarin gas
the way the mustachioed dictator dropped death
on the Kurds and the mother cradling her daughter

fell and they both sucked up death not knowing why
or that it had come on a not particularly special
Thursday morning on the way to market

I'd like to, but the forest behind my house is cold
today and the small bells of March flowers
aren't even dreams yet it's January

but not that cold and I have no plans to leave the house
today because my bills are mostly paid we have food
and I don't think it's a good day to walk into dying

some days the falling women tear at your screams
but today is sharp and clear and cold and I'm alive
and later I will cradle my daughter by the fire

and tell her stories of monsters and the way
that they kill the old and the young on a Thursday,
but not in those words and not all at once

Remembering An Old Girlfriend

The moon has risen in her place,
Not the bone-white lunar pockmark, but all symbol,
As the absence of pain is not happiness.
The Sea of Copernicus smoothly turns
Around toward me, drops its monthly dusting
On the trees and valleys, the bristling creek
Where the frogs cough in their church-polite
Voices. The moon has filled out with her eyes
And squints through my window where I hold
Up my scaffold of bones against nightmares
With a black and soothing cup of Vienna roast.

I grant craters the meaning they seek.
I tell stories of black skies and weightlessness
And how a car with its dead battery
Is up there, just like my own neighborhood,
And that it will never start again or pull up
Beneath the magnolia shade and wait for her
To come out and tell me what she has in mind
For the evening. Lumbering old celestial
Basketball, roll right over us. Break us down.
I am your sentinel tonight and will call the others
Out. I will reveal what unspeaking things mean.

Goodbye

I have to be going now, going away for some time.

It's an old touching scene, the unpaid bills,
Pepsi Cola caps, stamps from the British Commonwealth.

I am the Old Incurable, multiple nicknames,
pale jonquil yellow growing dense and less liquid.
all the hankies will be up and blowing in the smoke.

There's this distinct lack of palpable sentiment.

Henry James shaves off the beard, gone portly
and heaving himself in front of me for emphasis.

You, my friends, snare me with the small absence of gifts,
no going-away colognes or leather goods,
no fictive glances intended to gauge my distress.

No one slips me a Percodan. No one stands slowly on the dais
and makes a fine feast of farewell words;
there's no Irish toast as you head out, one on one.

I have to be going now, and there's a chilly renewal
on the sideboard where the cheese is shrinking
from lack of moisture and the peanuts have disappeared,

all but their shells.

Watching Hale-Bopp

That stream of ice is no more distant than my childhood
Saturday afternoons at the Madison swimming pool
When I watched Joan' s black hair spin outward
Beneath the green scalloped wavelets. It is no closer

Than the grace I beg from God and fail to earn
Or the equinox in the closest galaxies just east
Of the elm beside my front porch. That bright smear
Has a blood-line like the one my daughter owns.

That peacock tail fans out past my favorite lives,
Under the water of stars. I disappear when clouds come,
Go down until I cannot breathe, so very deep
That, even rising, I can never shine that way again.

Homecoming

this is the dazzling Vermont of childhood books
and I'm coming around to understanding saturation
like N. C. Wyeth did, only these clumps of green and granite
fill the picture plane like a spaniel fills a lap

don't go away thinking I'm the recluse of Green Mountain
or that the tilted cattle fields define adolescence
or that Mrs. Owlsley churns butter with slim wrists
because what is definite in the city clots in the country

or rather I meant to say that I am coming home
with a laugh in my throat where it's been stuck
all these years

The Horses of War

They awaken to dancing, musketry, shellfire
By the treeline. All night the dust has risen
In their throats, a sense of thirst and July,
Hollow-sounding old nags tied to sentinel oaks.
They hear the commands, their flanks twitch
With flies and wonder. Sun breaks down
The darkness. The soldiers do not bring out
Bags of oats or take them to the water.

The apple-core moon hangs low and flat
Against the Pennsylvania light; the air goes still
As an echoed sound. Voices turn the campfire
Banter into solemn repetitions, holy banter
Somewhat distant from a prayer. A charge
Is near, bridle, bit, and dried-out saddle
Half-slung on, careless of that canter into noise.
The apple-core moon simmers into silver waste.

They hold that scent of loss. Now to rock up
Like a child's sweet toy, to come down bent bone
And dripping flesh -- steady soldiers into flame,
A rising, turning from the gray ribbon of fire.
Now to hear the acid bugle call, the creatures
Crying for their mothers or a scene from home
As they fell down into the simmering grass
Of the battlefield. By the creek are beds of moss.

Who writes our lives upon the sheet of casualties?
Who sings us into sleeping? We wait until dawn
Finds our hooves stuck out for reaping, then we sing
Our legs in memory to the men who will recall
That after death the horses seemed to carry on
With it all, legs up and ready to spring onward.
We come to the field and die again and again.
We die again and again and again and again.

The Last Iditarod

I.

Beyond him now is only ice. The dark day
 Holds the sun bound in cold; his thawless dogs
 Rush onward toward the steam of breath.
 In the night there are stars frozen to that stillness,
 Or snowstorms whose flakes are warmer
 Than the air outside his tent. He is awake.
 He senses the rocking sled beneath that rush
 And the pull of his dogs in their rising bones.

He cannot move now. The sea stretches onward
 In a blind white arch, the frames of trees bend
 Beneath the weight of this season without color.
 He wants to scrape madly at the feet of crystallized
 Madness that lies straight down for miles as he lies
 Within the tent. The axis of a wild lost country
 Whispers for him. Snow begins again, and the dogs
 Wait to be buried and insulated against the cold.

He could cry frost. He could curse in vowels of sleet.
 He thinks of the warm world, of blood in its tides
 As heated as the Earth's core, pouring in the body's
 Deep blue caves. He could rear mosquitoes.
 What insulates him from memory now, what reveals
 Seasons less immaculate in their pale greens?
 He stares at the small flame and speaks of mud
 That he would scoop up and smear across his eyes.

II.

It takes this to be a man. He must awake in the jewels
 Of trail and half-buried trees to see his beard glisten
 In a windy sun. The cold that came in the snowblind
 Darkness is now cold in the failed furnace of morning
 Where he gears up and set the team in order, lead dog
 Up already and begging for his harness, for a hard run
 To work up the old lace of lungs. He cannot wait long
 Or the others will slide past him in the gauze of fog.

Toward the light, into shadows, toward the parapets
 Ruled by white bear and the ivory hare: He rules them
 All by not waiting on them to attack or die of age.
 He is the trail himself, the mark by which they know

A year has passed deep within the beating heart of snow.
Toward memory of a cabin in the back woods summer
When his mother whispered his name: He rules it all.

Or he is prince of vastness, and skin so dried out
That the rime feels like aloe along his whipping arms
And the creeping numbness is what he loves best
Anyway. The dogs create the motion that he controls,
And he controls nothing and comes only for the ride
As he hold the team straight just past his beard.
The road is just what he had feared. It is straight
And uncluttered and endless. He is not quite alone.

III.

Beyond him now is only a purse or the lovely lakes
Of hell, that boiling, scarred paradise where he will dip
Himself up to the heart. He knows it now, that this path
Will never end, that each morning he will gear up and ride
The rails of snow, and the brittle, tearless cold will draw
Their atlas in his beard. He will start nowhere, arrive
Nowhere, and he cannot speak and he cannot ever stop.
And the seasons will never change. He is bone white.

Other teams begin to pass him in the curves; he feels
Their slush thrown up waist high, the dogs cry out
For more whip, but he cannot give it. He holds the handles
Of his arms out in supplication, but they do not understand
He is fading already. He is sinking down day by day
Into the past. A spring is down there, warm loam, flowers
With yellow cups, all kinds of color and breaking seeds.
He will circle, wait until the spring begins its cruel beating.

He has left the trail now, or never was upon it anyway,
And he says the names in falling feathers, the old names
Of friend or sister, his mother's pet names she spoke
In the slumber of her arms. He uses up the talismen of day

As the light fades on him, and he strikes his face for fire
And the words no longer spark off. He will find nothing
As he rides. He will look for a reckoning of the cold stars.
They will hear his soft howl in the far northern forest.

Juke Doctor

I remember the big Wurlitzer jukeboxes
standing in line at their repair station
because the arm fell wrong, the lights choked
themselves off when the music began

and they were all jewels and cupped shadows
and muscles bulging from Charles Atlas ideas
that pumped themselves into the glass
with Patti Page and Kay Starr and Frankie

and I'd wait while the juke doctor reached
down their innards to swap out a dead tube
or charred resistor and suddenly they'd flash
a warning that they'd come back around

to their single purpose, and the juke doctor
would rise with his slender tool and punch
a song, and suddenly that vast rotten bass
and treble would make our eardrums tremble

as if a junkie was in the bathroom with his fix
and all the hipsters were finger-snapping
and the men with their gray felt hats had come
in the room smoking and looking for love

The Librarian Treads Water After the Shipwreck

Proust would sink me; The Delphian Course, ten thick volumes
from the Renaissance onward, would hasten my descent,
like *Alvin*, the submersible from the Wood's Hole Oceanographic Institute.

I'd be throwing away all of Dreiser, Ayn Rand (death in the brine),
all anthologies of Greek Tragedy, anything by Stephen King.
The detritus of crew would scream and sink as they held McMurtry

through the storm. I'd go for one of Elizabeth Bishop's books
maybe; in fact, just one poem with its perfect short lines,
and I'd hang on a vowel or two as the wind blew east.

They rescuers would come and find me bobbing like a moose
or a woodchuck and haul me up safe and very quiet on deck.
The others? They died with their arms around *The Golden Bowl*.

The Evangelical Family Library

Grandma says upon her knees
That bivalves love an honest man
Half to death with pleasure, so
Why not have a chug of beer?
God loves a coma, Grandpa says,
A place to nap for some years.
So much for tears. If a dog can
Have its day, so much to say,
That it lies asleep all day
In the grass, then our similar vows
Are sacrificial just as fine and well.
Hell, says Grandma, is where you go
To shop and be speechless all day.
Heaven, he shouts right back, is time
To dance all night long one more
And never fear the heart, or falling.
It's a calling.

An Injunction to Enjoy Life

Wrap your lips around a buttered scone,
Test the limits of delight.
Salt your pork. One sight
You cannot forget is the penitent stone.

You cannot forget the penitent stone,
Or the fabric of this bread
That is broken in your head.
We come as victims, and we come alone.

We come as victims, and we come alone
To the hoe-cake by the fire-
Place where the sweet lyre
Sings of where our fathers have all gone.

Sing of where our fathers have all gone!
Burn our names upon a rock.
Feed us well, we watch the clock.
Wrap your lips around a buttered scone.

At Litchfield Beach

O speak again, bright angel,
From the motel balcony with a migraine
And your shrew's whine about lost
Traveler's checks, the late hour, cigarettes,
The weather. Thou art more sublime
Than Vagisil or deflated condoms floating
In the pool. Talk through your fat nose
About the traffic, the late hour,
And *the tide, the tide, the goddamn tide.*
O she doth teach the torches to burn bright,
Or is that a Bic lighter at the tip
Of your Virginia Slims?
Thou art shapeless as a ham,
Thy hair about to burst in flame.
Did my heart abhor till now?
What gave disgust before she came?
Fetch my rapier for me, boy.
There are memories to destroy.

Lolita Turns Fifty

1.

The mammogram was negative Friday,
Her pap smear normal, and still
A vague unease: the fit of sunglasses
All wrong, half-flirt timing gone.
She gardens. Crabgrass, cancer green,
Grows in the tomato cages where
It's hard to pull. Her left knee
Clenches when it's bent too long.

2.

She most recalls how wise he seemed,
Influential tics and that solidity
Her life had lacked. She cuts the okra
Off and thinks of sweet adulteries,
Lessons in the country, years later
Reading of his last attack. He had
A distinguished career. She wants
Something of that grayer breeding.

3.

She turns the soaker hoses on. Mulch
Will keep the surface damp all day.
At night, the does and fawns come out
From the pine forest and quietly graze
On her work. She finds the broken stalks
Their lips, soft on soft, have cropped.
Once that suffering begins, every taste
And touch is hers and hers alone.

The Old Lover and the Old Love

The wind is shaking rain from oaks and pines.
A cat is with him, warms his twisted legs.
He has waited all this life for signs.

Memory is circular, and lines
Lead us far away where shadows beg
For absolution or a short-term loan.

A season urges all the bark to shine.
The brothers tap another foaming keg.
A Siren at the Ball begins to whine.

Love will change. A journey down the Rhine
Is nothing. On his heart a man will peg
Everything. Once, he will opine,

He was a man, but sank beneath the brine
Within her bays. His ancient twisted legs
Cannot outrun the rain from oaks or pines.

To Lucasta, on Going to the Ward

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind
That from the screaming
Of the mad I stagger mad and blind.
They take you into drugs and dreaming,

Subtle masters, so you need a shield.
Your shout a sword, a flag, a cure,
They take you to a seventh seal.
I remain alone, our loving field

Still green my addled love, my ache.
I love you more than honor claims,
Your cheek-warmed tears I still adore.
True love bathes at first, then maims.

White Male, Age Fifty-One

Today, I am surrendering. They came
Around the house, starved me out,
Called me names, withheld affection.
I can't take this anymore. I found
Ways beyond it all and clear escapes,
But I'm coming out with my hands up.
They -- you, so to speak -- called me
A white man, straight and middle-aged
And rebuked me. I have no agenda.
I am the worst of the lot,
The runt of my hated tribe
Who held out hope that you would
Forgive Charlemagne, ignore wars.
I am not my incendiary bretheren,
But I will be sacrificed anyway,
So I dawdled. I have sewn clothes,
Broken seeds, chilled a jam
Of new berries and genuine denials.
I have not yet come to terms
With this sense of splendid failure.
They will give us no martyrs.
But today, just as these sentences cool,
I am bent on silence and surrender.

At My Grandmother's Grave

You rose from oil lamps to the moon,
A stone's now propped upon your head.
And this granite came too soon
From quarry to your lasting bed.

Birds. Feathers in the oaks
Above me, sun along the sills
Of other graves, old jokers
With their punch-lines pressed and milled

Like the edges of a coin.
Grass. Magnolia, fragrant lips.
No one asks me where I'm going
Today. We all take off on trips

Nowhere at the end of time,
Don't we? Rain can soak your vault
The same as rain will cover mine.
That day you called a sudden halt

To breathing, I had planned to put
A Leyland cypress in my yard.
Did it, too, and used my foot
To tamp the earth. So very hard

To lie new in our southern soil
Not needing Sunday frocks or boots.
The grass and rain will end your toil,
Your hands weave tapestries from roots.

The Story of Mrs. Mancusi

Mrs. Mancusi upstairs is nothing like a toaster,
like blueberry bagels or the smooth smear
of cream cheese. She shrieks unlike Maria Callas.

She impresses with those dictatorial cats,
the one named Willie who laps up mouse cheeks
on the summer sills, the other Christophe Willibald
with one blind eye and memories of the bulldog Butch
from the last house. A faint whiff of oranges
and eastern Europe lingers on her doilies. She cries.

Mostly it's the morning when she starts to cry,
since her husband sang while he was shaving off the foam
of the Mediterranean, snatches of Puccini and Parma,
but he's dead. Mrs. Mancusi wants comfort, she's nothing
like comfort, though, as much like stones as comfort,
and her son comes to scrape back the dried lichen
from her heavy arms. Mrs. Mancusi's son is nothing
like a son or like a crescent wrench or a velcro clasp.

She wants a daughter who would come upstairs
and share drafts from the window in her den, take tea
and pop down a life comfortably, into a toaster
where once again the warmer days would find them.

Mrs. Mancusi is not like a woman with a daughter.

March Across Georgia

Spring! Shoulder blades stained green
Run up beneath the roots, shine white
As March turns to sun. That old melt
Sweetens every step. I did not know
The hostas would come for me again.

I dig onions out with that scapula,
Marrow on stone in all soft soil,
Worm's blood, pores, the fescue tendons.

One calf wore this bone. One spring
He slept in the luxury of shadows
Cast by the field that is my garden
Now. It is altogether reasonable that

Veins fill once more, seeds renew
Themselves across the earth. But
How impossible it feels to know,
By heart, this wind that comes again.

Marriage in Middle Age

I could clasp *Tristan*
like the nubs on the lips of a change purse
and claim love for the new century
as all my cheerful own,

but she can't stand how I slurp
my soup, how the spoon
hits the bottom of the bowl
when I scrape. She can't know

that I'm thinking of Howard Hanson's
"Nordic" symphony and a cat
who once owned me -- she has no idea.
Or else *Tristan* is the wrong work.

What I really meant to say
is that I could become her own calico
on the antique buffet and that scraping
my heart with her nails might waken

something remarkable in both of us
that has slipped past for these years
as we rock upon the sea
and wait for love or death,

one or the other.

Poem for Mickey Mantle from Marianne Moore

Crushed-knee, swarthy in the outfield
 And clomping in like clockwork between innings:
You played for that impossible team whose art
 Was neither chintz nor hale. As if an Absynnian
Prince arrayed in star-rubies had shown up
 At Mr. Churchill's door to explain warfare
With sticks and shouts. And now your liver
 Has blown our for this reason and that, caulk
Of sweetbreads cracked, dropped into pot where
 It can no longer be the wine or host. Break-
Downs, broken records, "the arc of the ball rising,"
 A self-correcting parabola on the decorative
Glass air of Yankee Stadium: a pretentious
 But altogether plausible stein of miracles.

Somewhere in Middle Age

The brave men of the world step on me like a bug!

I turn into a stain or something even more temporary
like love or a Popsicle, with its tart orange half-life,

but that's all right because I always knew I wouldn't last
forever, and these interruptions are the payment
for that morning at Jekyll Island when I held the late stars

in my palm and felt the tide's foam chase my boy's feet
down the sand! I was thinking of the word *ebb*
and loving it when some air-footed girl ran past me

with her spring muscles, and I saw her body flex in the sun
as it hauled its red carcass up from the Atlantic,
me thinking: It's not all over for me, not quite yet.

Might As Well Be

Your poems are starting to make no sense
my father said, apple feathers and dryads
holding up my country front porch, skunk
families waddling past in striped papal
majesty, well, that's how it goes when age
curls your fingers and your once cute toes
the things you thought you knew poof
poof gone dampness of a cat's autumn nose
girl's pear-shaped cheeks and the aroma
of her breath close in a car seat what was
that like it's gone and one thing replaces
another so much traffic piano, dictionary
blues that it might as well be Sweet 'N Low
as spring

Against Minimalism

I am not here, my presence is a bore
These days. I want to go where less is more.

Minimal Phil with a maximal world view --
Saint Ray Carver, take me off with you

In the genuflections of an eye!
Words like "one" and "who" and "by."

Half a story's better than a tale
Full told. Jonah and the Metaphor.

Old men doing nothing with their hands.
Indirection, indecision -- grand!

Saint Ray Carver, singular with nouns,
I cannot hear the laughter from your clowns.

I cannot smell the roses in your book,
I cannot come. I'll cheat and take a look

At the real world and its lengthy sins,
Where stories don't begin and never end.

My Own Kind

Next year I'm going to be God, a cloud palace
the color of lilacs or summer violets
and gilt but not gold that would rule out thrift
and God would be be thrifty because he needn't be.
I'll wave my wand in one earthly direction.

I'll have a barbecue and all the generations of dead
will get the invitation be at the palace tonight
and God will have an announcement and they come
walking forward in their cowls of light and it's a floating,
a calm lilt the color of old hot-ironed cotton sheets.

They will assemble, millions grape-heavy on the banks
and I will wave my arm and a shower of silvered drops
will rain among them well it's a good thing to be here
but then I drop the bomb, that they will have to work
now and find themselves pulling ditches, such.

The next day, they vote me out and go for a man
with a beard the color of light he sends me to a ledge
at heaven's last outcropping and says that if I say a word
he'll have some hired wings shove me off into hell
I say I deserved that, and I do, I should have left

well enough alone, and I find myself as the former guard
sitting in that land without shadows as alone
as a man could possibly be and I know what I have lost
not the power, not the palace but the sound of voices
the friction and desires from my own kind.

Days pass. Other ex-Gods show up, the ones hidden
in the deep coves and cataracts, and we dream as men
without death dream, not of great works or shadows
but of how we once had all fine things in our own hands
and threw that glory from us, like sun throwing off dawn.

The Lessons of Those We See

What was his name or hers, the reticent voices
From the street corners or from books whose spines
I touched in the libraries of my past? No way to know.
And yet I feel them at my stride, the widow who believes
That love cannot be known or loss quite understood,
The carpenter in his heart-attack blood, sucking up
A Camel. I try to see their faces, the cutter's slab,
The elegant girl's flip disconnection from me as she turns
Away and then looks back to make sure I am looking
As she goes. I squint to see the textures of their clothes.
In the poor soil of my consideration, each one grows.
I smell the pheromone of her perfume, his dishonest sweat
As we pass on stairs and never meet again. I hear Bach
Somewhere disembodied, from headphones, a tinny fugue,
All repeats taken, but I do not know who bears a love,
Who bears a threat. I gave them nothing, perhaps a glance
Or a half-smile to show I held no threat, but nothing really,
Not time or directions or my feelings of the news or weather.
They visit me sometimes in the barely moving summer motes
Where I sit for the sake of silence. I hear their smart leather
Footsteps on the garden flagstones, catch on to an argument
In strident whispers. I see one businessman as he turns
Slightly toward me, his face masked up with pale bravado,
And I wave to him. He acts as if he might remember me,
His hand goes up then stops to smooth his hair. He can't
Place me, can't recall the eyes that turn modestly away
From him. He sees his watch: My God, look at the time.
Yes. That is it exactly, I want to say. That is the lesson.

The Subjects of Poetry

Not about hospitals or crepe-soled shoes on the tile,
Not about wreaths tacked down upon the new mound,
Not about the loss of love or memory of a girl's eyes,
Not about the search for a missing lop-eared hound.

Not about wrecks or failure, age or a moment gone,
Not about a timid fur-bound creature in our sights,
Not about third marriages or a broken Wedgwood bowl,
Not about the mountain. Not about those awful heights.

About the arc of tea poured in a pleasing blue cup,
About the woman, eighty, singing all the verses of a hymn,
About the constellations dozing up behind the clouds,
About the base-line shots that do not even touch the rim.

About my daughter laughing like a fountain in my arms,
About the loving whispers covered on the coldest night,
About the slow decay of grief, the purple tulips on their stems,
About the crest of waves, the old geometry of light.

Not Quite Love

Let's get this straight
violet emblems of new flowers the smell of wings
but it's still a dark January on this ridge
what grinds these vast boulders
below my house can't say but anyway
 I feel a haze of birthdays and chokecherry
of native azalea that will break blossoms
 in their own punky skin
but let's get this straight
to be a city man you must forget wings
and how their convex surfaces cause lift
 must forget violets and stones large enough
to hold cities that's how it goes on this ridge
where a sound arrives with its bags packed
to carry us both away toward some dying,
 a natural world, a fine haze of something
not so artificial as a street but not quite love

Ocean of Regret

Something that absorbs something else
well, it's there somewhere, the violent hate of fog-dipped clouds

that soaks up the sky like a dry wick
that sucks off the disgust in my daily rituals

something that skates up the ice of my arm
and melts that ocean of regret

ah, how blatant this world has become
when you can draw up all my juices

when I can metaphor you into a stunted corner
saying something like "ocean of regret"

and meaning it

Overheard in a Doctor's Office

I used to grow the roses, Sutter's Gold
And Brandy and Mojave were my best
But then I lost the touch for it.
They would bud and go black. I tried
All the sprays, don't you know, prayed
Over them, that's right I did, I sat
Inside that spring and the midges come.
So to took to growing marigolds to stink
Away the bugs, but then they died
So I tried bulbs, and the irises grew
Without flowers, just flat blades like swords,
Maybe it was the sun, I don't know.
My cantaloupe was too soft. Earworms
Eat all the corn right up. It was God
Punishing me, you see, and now I got
This cancer of my breast, which I say
I don't deserve, but it keeps growing
And spreading and don't nothing kill it.
You tell me: Don't that mean something?
Well, don't it?

Pavane

Megan walks behind me in a stately rhythm,
Her hovering step not tracing my own.
She is three years old. Look! she cries,
As the anoles scatter, as we taste and twist
In the morning's dewy spiderwebs. I look.
I trace the patterns of my ancestry in her eyes,
The fragmentary genetic code of dirt farmers
In South Carolina. I wonder what they saw
On harvest mornings, at the appointed time
For animal husbandry. I want them to stare
Down the narrow day and see Megan
Up on her toes calling for me to come,
To wipe the sticky webs behind her eyes.
Megan's own grandchild might discover hawks
And turn to call her. I want that child
To believe in the slow turn of succession,
To touch our memory in the lift of wings.
We are all of a singular generation,
And we break, and we heal, and we listen
For the evidence of passage on the path.

Peccaries

Frank Buck wrote about a peccary,
About catching one of the odd creatures,
And I thought: I could adventure,
I could hack up the Congo jungles,
Breach the Great Divide and discover
My limits, wake up to hear peccaries
Snuffling outside tents in our camp.
I could pioneer the peccary genome,
Find the element for tusks, insert it
In a novel line of corn, or clue
Greenpeace to the fading habitat
Of cloven-hoofed mammals of note.
I could break the Great Rift Valley
Into zones of carnivore and peccary
And medicinally valuable mycogens.
I could assist the United Nations
And chair the Peccary Restoration Fund,
Host a National Geographic special
About nutrition and reproduction,
The cruelty of the natural world,
And the old necessity for predators.

The Pelican

I should know the life-span of birds.
I should know if terns remember me
From a visit eight years ago, if age
Arrives for sandpipers in the afternoon.
I should know about pelicans, pouches,
Formation-flying and their sudden dive
From sixty feet, beaks down into the water
For a shadow beneath the breakers.
I should know the evolution of awkwardness
And trace our common ancestor back.
I should know how blame is shared
When the wave-hunting goes so wrong
A pelican could starve. I should know
Where they go in the midst of storms.

Dream of Penguins

I stumbled out of bed and found my living room
full of penguins, some in smoking jackets,
a couple arguing Hegel by the mantle piece
and the penguin kids were playing penguin Monopoly
on the carpet, shaking dice in their curved flippers.

Asleep! Had to be. But then the eldest, a gray beard
of snow or frost hanging from his shrinking beak,
tottered over to me and asked if I wanted brandy
and I did, and he poured me a snifter and we talked
of how death is like a wedding or not like a wedding.

I find it hard to face the truth of that morning.
He was laughing at my confusion when his wife penguin
came out of the kitchen and said that the kettle had boiled
and that there was no need for anyone to be cold again.
"You don't understand what I am telling you!" she shouted.

"None of you ever has to be cold again!"

**A Photograph of Me and My Brother,
Our Dog and Cat, Taken in 1957**

I cannot touch the veil. Boys
In the backyard, my arm around
Flipsy's neck, gone for three decades
Now to dog bones, Mark beside us.
I want to quell the summer mysteries
Of those wide ears, the pecan trees,
Fence posts in the washed light.
Two faces love by warm soil,
Our father unseen but also there
Holding the Speed Graphic: I cannot
Touch the distance of homecomings.
The cat we called Gym went away.
All night I track him in the woods
Long logged out, hoping for a glimpse
Of my small hands upon his coat,
The easy rise of such contentment.
Boys, do not listen to me now.
Do not move from that statuary glance
To play. Hold that film in place.
I cannot touch the heart of me
Anymore or recognize that face.

Place

I do not want to leave before my time,
But I will leave before my place
Is altogether clear. Suppose I was meant
To tend hogs or manufacture cigars,
To ride out the Fifties in old Havana.
What if I had harvested the shrimp
Off Savannah or taught a humorless
Brand of philology at New York University
When the abstract expressionists had come
To town? My place is unsecured against
Calamity, without tenure. I could hold
To that beech tree by Wildcat Creek,
The one with the fat, cracked-up
Initials of a boy from thirty years ago,
But I will slip away. We might move
The coffins every year until the place
Seems right to those who have survived,
The ones who still lie haunted by light
And leaving before their time.

On a Plane Crashing in Kansas

First, the wings, and then the stall,
Next a plummet toward the plains.
Third, your name upon a wall
Of memory, the fire of grains.

Minutes down, depending on
Trajectory and speed.
A hunter drops his shining gun.
Wheat will hold the final deed.

Fall -- a metaphor for lives
Too deep in life to rise into
Paradise. Ninety wives
Are coming down in shades of blue,

Gingham, voile, and azure prints.
Sixty husbands take the vow
Of gravity, the perfect sense
Of moon and tides upon a prow.

The hunter sees an order crawl
Down, jigsaw colors as they
Crack into a rural sprawl.
Voices? He cannot really say

This crying is a human kind,
Or wind, immaculate with fears.
Soon enough we all go blind.
The saddest eyes shall have no tears.

April 9, 1842

Travis pulled the shoe from the mule's sore hoof
and threw it toward the tumbled metal,
thought of broken iron, of pulling every muscled load
of cotton toward town, of his mother's evening cries
in her last illness now, father hopeless with grief.
Travis was their only son, dark and strong, shadowed
with green fancies, wondering of the ocean's curl,
if foam turned shoreward as the artists told,
how life kept churning past each death, how each
daughter, each son, left this world alone; he touched
the brittle hoof and shod the animal once more.
A night could blaze with fear, spirits crying
against his sleep, too fierce for farming on this love,
this profession of bursting bolls; they never left Travis
a tip cup of peace. Listen. Old winds whine for childhood,
some rush backwards when she stands cooking all day,
singing hymns she knows. She could never read.
Travis stood at the fence as night came,
twenty come Sunday, silent as the wheel of grief.

Adolescence

She spills into her stroke, awkward
in the blue water. Her feet have grown
too broad for delight, hand over hand
for twenty feet in the whitecap curls,
glancing to see if boys have watched
how foolishly she moves. A year before,
when blood came only from a finger cut,
the water laughed upon her bathing suit;
she lay upon her back, her toes above
the splash, waving at her father's smile.
Now each blue stretch, each elbow flown
out upon the blaze of summer eyes
fells so weak and wrong. She sits
beneath a towel in the car and knows
no matter where her father drives,
the room she find is not her own.

A Sense of August

Bird calls are heavy tonight. The fire
of summer's turned down; stars squint
at us beyond the edge of the red oaks,
squirrels slow, leaves tight and still.
The grocery list takes hours. Old dogs
move a few feet before their pachyderm sway
pulls them into grass. I want to say
summer makes days drip down
my chest. I want to shrug off a season,
St. John howling for autumn. Can you bear
it when nothing has moved the next day
and snail roads slice across the stones?
The crickets begin along the creek.
They stop. The wings above us barely move.
Soon, dark silence will flower in me.
You are doing something different
with your hair.

Beethoven on Dying Batteries

You heard it this way: a grinding roar,
the strings half drowned in awful sleep.
Coming and going. The horns plunged beneath
this earth then came into pitch, kettledrum
a thunder, then the cannon's full roar,
flute first fishwife shrill then humming.
You heard crescendos, then beating silence
where the notes were rich, elbows pumped;
bassoons and oboes held their noses
then were lyric as the breaking sun.
I heard it this way, too. Soon the power
of the batteries would fade, and sounds
all fail to stir my pulse, and all devout
reflections of the water, leaf and stone
dissolve the way they did for you.
I did not think about it long.
The players laid down their bows so soon
you could have missed it when I wept
as popped the dead ones out.

Day of the Beasts

The elk locked antlers. They bellowed
as the snow dripped crimson at their hooves
and twisted for an hour. They stopped.

Snow began to settle in the softest eyes
a forest holds. Close enough to smell
the other's tough and bristly flanks,

they waited. When elk are locked,
when the wind rises and snow comes,
they will wait. They will look away

for any crunch of paws upon the ice,
for any unlocked breath of beasts,
for any sign of the coming night.

Bête Noire

The beast in my closet has grown old
waiting for my frightened eyes to light the room
again. When we were young his teeth
dripped full-mooned blood of boys
and whispered names at midnight
as I listened for my own among the creaking barns.
He could keep the sun below the woods
with his muscled claws, keep it gone
forever as I lay and listened to the clock
of my heart knocking in the bunk-bed gloom.
He held my fear as if the prize
of one child's unknowing night gave power
to every beast at every house along the earth.
Now our whiskers both are streaked with gray,
and when he howls my name at night,
I hear how age has cleaned my little room,
how hard it is among these latter days
to know, when moonlight fills my bed,
just who is afraid of whom.

Poem for Brandon

My son will soon outgrow me,
throw my hand from his when cars flow
past us in the street. His eyes will roll
away to say he can't believe what fools
have children, why the curse of fatherhood
fell on the man whose hand he held
so recently. And on that day,
that last day when his still reaches mine,
I ask the grace to think one time
when I am gone with age and dreams
he will take my shrunken palm
and help me through the terrifying cars,
that he will hold what holds him now,
in the changing seasons of our love.

A Burial at Sea

My inheritance is brine, starfish-fed mullion
of a thousand dives, the claws dazzled
by darkness on the pebbled floor. All human
sounds, all joints we pivot in landfall
come from sea, arose from scale and fin.
My fathers gasped upon the shore until
breath broke through, and one lay in life
upon the dunes and watched the sea
for signs that all would leave it,
that salt and depth would be alone,
that everything living would pull the sun
into new lungs. My first grandfather
without claws would be astonished
at how deep the waves remain,
how full of floating life that sank
beneath the light to sing it could not leave
the mingled blood of every race.
They wrap me now, the liquid heart of all earth
around me as I dive to my ancestral home,
beating, I hear my brothers call, beating.
Currents will take me to the shores
of all lands, my body which is given
without season to the filmy, boneless phantoms
and the rows of loving teeth. They spread
the word that everything alive is not beneath
the wonder of their rocking waves, that the stories
of their ancient ones are true. They sing
me into tongues of seaweed and forgive each breath
I took upon the land. My mother's fins
swirl over me, and in eternal sea
I bathe a final time beneath her loving tears.

Attack of the Cat Women

If women licked their bodies clean like cats
in long, loving strokes from rough tongues,
the sound of purring would drown out
back-alley fights of dull men, all of us.
We would tremble at the first touch
of tongue to skin, we men who would watch
them clean first between their fingers so gently.
When they moved to their arms, streets falling
to silence as all fighting stopped, we would voyage
in their bathing. By the time they licked
their shoulder clefts, all men would fall,
weeping to serve, offering vats of pure milk,
driving to New Orleans, to meet the shrimp boats.

The Meaning of College

I'd like for you to meet Betty and Hal,
my good friends from the old days at college.
As you can see, Betty never lost the weight
from her second pregnancy, and she wears
too much mascara now, as if to keep from seeing
the absolute horrors of the world. Right, Betty?
Hal still works for the city, drives a truck
around all day looking for sewerage breakdowns.
Hal and I marched against the war,
and so did Betty, and we lived together on Elm Street
in a large house, and sometimes I made love to Betty,
but you didn't mind, did you Hal? You never minded
much of anything, but you and Betty have been so good
to me over the years, right, Hal? You can see that Hal
is not mad at me for saying I once loved Betty.
He won't even mind my telling that the second child
was not even his. Look at Betty now! Some secret,
Betty -- don't you know the second child is always
from a different heart? I will tell you more later.
My good friends Betty and Hal are taking us to dinner.
We always did this in the old days.

In an Unheated Convent Cell. Midnight.

She cannot believe the pain of bone.
By the candle's single petal now
in room with chair and bed and strain

she touches skin, her vow so brave
that any chiming rain upon the chapel
bell can never be so cold as this.

A single, ulcerated love will shine
when wax and wick have folded down
on table's roughened, splintered throne.

A love that passes out of bone
and blooms among the season's stars,
the night-cold whirl of crossing stars,

will hold her dying, flushed and warm
upon her aching knees: suffering is kind
to visit her upon the coming stone.

Ah, signore, suffering is kind.

A Keeper of Bees

The glade is full of drones today,
apostrophes of the wind who gather from flowers
so they may die. They dip among petals
of daisy and iris and foxglove,
rubbing in the brief glory of pollen.
The darkness is very near. Damp at night,
their wings fold, and honey rises in the comb
among the restless work of drones.
What if the drones consumed their own sweetness,
their own sticky tribute to one queen,
I wonder, what if love and death
were so close no man would touch it
until he craved one final ecstasy?
I can wait another night for her warmth.
Today, the glade is full of drones,
and my heart is no stronger than
the tissue of their wings.

The Fourth Floor

He hears the shoes of the night-shift nurse
squeak along the corridors, coming to ask
if he has rested in the comfort of his age,
the peace of drugs. He knows this sound
of soles at night from childhood,
his father propped higher than death for days
upon his bed, and in the hushed kitchen
his aunts moving to the talk and tea.
He lay in his own room and felt his father
slip into stone upon their squeaking heels.
O do not come into my room, he thinks now,
do not slip here on crepe soles
to bring me visions of the love I lose.
But already she is there beneath the light.
The night-shift nurse brings with her
a smell of cloves boiling in his childhood home,
brings with her schedules, something cold
to place upon his heart.

Furies Attack the Middle Class

I am so sick of you.

The way your spoon taps the shredded wheat bowl
long after the milk has gone. Your goddamned heel taps.

Nobody wears heel taps; a museum of symptoms
with a maze thrown in.

Once anyone comes in, they could hear you
gripe until the frozen sky turned stone.

Three days later, three days tops,
they wander after you, cracking their knuckles,
clearing their throats over and over and over.

I am so sick of all of you, of your twin-pocket shirts
and Swinger cameras. I want to hear one thing break,
the inevitable tear, the resounding crack.

Do something, damnit.

Then do just about anything else.

Her Time in the Bathroom

My name drips letters on the glass,
on the steam from your body
which lately stood beneath the rain,
glistening soap in hollow curves.

I wonder how long you have gone
into dry clothes, how your arm shone
with this sweet warmth: the heat
from water or your damp chest.

My tongue flicks this air once
to taste your showered smells,
and it has the deep female odor
of body musk and lavender soap.

A name: it follows you from glass
to another room, and I am gone
as well, heartless with lust,
my smile curling down the drain.

American Gothic

I exult in the smell of barns,
the yeasty rush of silage, cows alone
with their kind, uncurious eyes.
The idea of fresh milk rises in me
until I dream white rivers, banks sticky
with backwash cream. The cattle cry
my name and listen for my boots
on the spilled grain. This is all
they will ever be. They do not wish
to hear of greed or anger or fear.
I soothe them with a familiar voice.
Yes, they nod as I come into the barn,
one familiar word is all it takes.

Heat

Today, the heat will be dangerous.
Do not stay out for very long. Wear clothing
that is loose and comfortable. Allow your
breasts swinging space in thin cotton
and pretend the men who catch you,
frozen for a moment in their eyes,
are worried for your health. They will say
how pleased your comfort makes us all,
that the undercurves and berry thrusts
beneath these clothes are invisible:
they see nothing but the sense of heat.
They feel nothing else at all. You can swing
free among their turning eyes; heat
is the reason all men stagger toward you,
tongues thick with vowels, gasping.

Ilse Meets Rick Years Later in Paris

She finds him at a McDonald's on the Champs Elysee,
hollow eyed and hunched over coffee,
looking out at the rain where skateboard boys
hear David Bowie sing on their Walkmen.

He has not shaved for two days like a wino,
and his cigarette hand shakes; his hair
is white, a pale crown upon his pale skull.

*Richard, she thinks, if you only know how much
I love you! How much I still love you!*

She floats between the special sauce and sesame buns
to Rick, dreaming of New Year's Day in Casablanca,
how she fled with Victor Laszlo; but Victor
left her after the war for a sex change in Stockholm,
and now he writes as Victoria Lassiter.

She stands in front of Rick now, tears upon her cheeks,
wanting to reach out. And as he looks up,
she sees it in his eyes! Yes! Richard still loves her,
and where is Sam, then? Could he play *that* song
now as the world comes back together for us?

*Oh Richard, she cries. She's coming back, he says,
I know she's coming back. Her eyes are dazzling;
it's me, she says, it's Ilse and I'm here for you.*

No, he says. Ilse is lovely. You look like shit.

She cannot believe that life has let them grow old,
that the fundamental things apply, as time goes by.

The Sound of Her Name

She came to our reunion in a wig.
Which breast was it they had taken now,
which poison did they pour into her blood
to kill the laughing cells of cancer?
She smiled as if our class would know
how long ten years can be, that anniversaries
of any length were celebrations of the wind.
She did not drink beer. She nibbled at her food
through smiles for high school days,
and I stood away and watched the way her hands
traced sentences upon the heart of summer.
We sang and drank the evening full,
stars, eyes, children now who bear our words,
but I could never say her name
or ask her what it means to go alone
back home before the mirror of this night.
The day the paper came and she had gone
I only sent her this: *Joan*, I said,
Joan, I said, *Joan*.

Into the Labyrinth

Follow thread. It will take you
nowhere in particular. You will love
the side trips, scientific marvels
like stone icicles or cave pearls.
A monster lives here somewhere.
Don't worry. One moment you'll be
telling of an idea you had,
then, nothing. Just a blank sheet.
This monster kills so quickly,
so cleanly, that religion won't
begging to explain things. The thread
will lead you straight to him.
You can't turn around. Halfway
through this place, that occurs to you.
You might as well keep going.
No one has ever gotten out of here,
let alone turned around.

A Message from a Misanthrope

Hi. I'm not home right now,
But if you leave a message, I'll get back
To you right away, or soon at least,
Before a season changes or a solar eclipse.
Just tell me anything, and I'll take it
Like a man, I'll call right away:
Your phone will ring by the weekend,
Or at least by the next legal holiday --
I am so glad to hear your voice
That I'll more than likely call you
Before the century turns, long before
Your grandchildren wrestle on the lawn
After Sunday dinner, before the last game
Of croquet is played, anywhere,
In the entire world.

In My Cabin on New Year's Day

When I die, this poem will die, too.
The syntax will begin to fail, and the inner light
it gave to resurrect my heart will fade.
This poem, they will conclude, makes no sense
after all, and the spelling is erratic,
the logic some had seen now clearly false.
This poem will turn white and slow,
feel it has done so little in its life
that it should not be recalled at all.
It will curl beside a passing thought,
thrust commas where they can't belong
and start to become incoherent.
What is this thing? They will ask in disbelief;
mere evidence how his words no longer
had the power of night or the taste of rain
and firelight; he should have quit before
the gift he once possessed abandoned him.
They will not know how once this poem
was the dancing green of children, how it shone
as clearly as the song of sun, kissed them all
and gave them life.

Hymn to Pan

If I got shit-faced drunk tonight,
If I shot out half the streetlamps in town
with my Wham-O slingshot and ball bearings,
If I drank a quart of wine so sweet
that blood would turn sugar from it,
that veins would glisten crystal white;
If I rolled naked in a bakery vat
to make a coat of flour, then popped raisins
like jewels down my dusty arms,
If I translated one entire Shakespeare play
into pig Latin and then interviewed myself
about it for Public Radio;
If I danced the Lindy five full hours
while I cracked a bowl of walnut meats
and sang eternal songs to wine,
If I drank until I was blind and dumb
and frankly half deaf, too: would you
love how literary we had been,
and how original our sin? Or would your eyes
resemble rape and tell me what a fool I was
to think romance was very much
the way it was when Helios was still a god
and nature trickled from the grape?

Four Quartets

Rain, Brahms, if I were rain,
were lieder sung beneath the soil,
the music of the whispered sane,
the labor of the sweatshop toil.

Wind, Bach, if I were wind,
from timid breeze to hurricane,
the labyrinth without an end,
the love that I will never gain.

Fire, Chopin, flames of love,
I resurrect my daily hope,
the rain that gathers from above,
the neck that dangles from a rope.

Earth, Mahler, planets round
in orbits on my darkest night,
the glory of the faintest sound,
the glory of the faintest light.

The Song of Satan

Oh the fire's more precious now that you are here,
friends, easy flames to scald your words,
the rancid, sulfurous love I so adore,
the crimson sky within these caves.
There is no reason for hell. Each break
comes with sudden joy for me, each misery
mounting to my throne so all may share
my wicked pleasure in their pain. My music
is the thrill of tire-screech, my art the blood
that is diseased so it may not be transfused.
Oh, my drama is the cage of flames
where the only breeze is borne among the sighs
of the witless undead; my love is your loss.
When you can no longer cry, when no anger swells
in you from the greatest injustice,
then you are completely in my dark arms.
You are my lovely children. You may never
hate me or taste the poetry of these flames.
I will roam for ages in the bones
of everyone you ever loved.

The Young Scholar

The woods are light, and I, too old for school,
may dream of slates and potbellied fires
with pleasure. Slates where I drew my name
before I knew the sounds, a fire with eyes
like dragons, red lyre of ancient songs.
I may dream Grendel into my room,
arm long whipped from its mythic socket,
bleeding poetry on a cold day. I may
resurrect the romance of learning,
now that no one tests me
or praises me when I merely write my name.

The Sound of Things

I hear the traffic
of other states: this morning
I hear every sound made
by wheeling things, the work
that claimed Sean and Jeanne,
the Jenner twins in Birmingham.
I inhale the creak of springs
as three-hundred-pound Candy
sinks in her MG: the groan
of springs moves past me toward
Italy. On the freeway near St. Pete,
a tire blows out and flaps
around its own wretchedness.
I tune the birds who nest
in my wrecked Mustang, rustling, beaks
full of meadow hay,
flakes of dark blue paint.

Prelude and Voodoo on a Theme by Wallace Stevens

"The house was quiet and the world was calm. The reader became a book."

One.

This book the world becomes upon my life
 This book of sea gull-winged morning and rain upon the path
 Through the raspberries or laughing down the broken spout:
 This book of calm world and doctor shingles hung out
 On the street, or streaks of wind in evergreen boughs --
 Have I really come into green so easily? What color
 Is rain in this book, the shade of memory, what slate sky
 Hovers off the coast to whip these showers home --
 The house was quiet anyway: I am not its book or bell
 Or even dripping limbs upon the whitewashed walls.
 Go look in the mirror now. Your eyes are a deep brown.

Two.

Quiet in the house
 Silent room,
 Quiet in the book of tapestries
 Come back late
 Any ink's your blood
 Soon I'll pin your heart
 In the light, come for you
 With sun and moon.
 With moon.

My Ancestors

Would not understand a grown man
out here in a cabin at dawn in love with words.
They would be within the earth, seeds themselves,
knowing what grows from a farmer's hands,
that axles creak and move, that germination
comes with rain and sun. They would ask
in farmers still believed in weeding,
if we came in at dusk, sunk in the agonies of bone
and muscle nearly numb from work.
I plant this poem for them and watch it grow.
Next winter I will dry its vowels on my shelf,
then scatter them on fields in spring
and see if anything will grow. My ancestors
will hear the sounds descending
and they will know that each word
came whole from their own lips.

Brandon Visiting

My son has gone visiting, I feel old.
Childless as hay rakes in burned fields,
seed still hot and blowing in from Carolina;

I see no point in plowing. The cattle cry
to be milked, but I am heavy with time
and cannot shed it, drain it out.

Something laughing should climb on my back
and spur me off in straight furrows,
tell me when to wait. My son is not here

tonight, and if my eyes ring, if rich lies
are told just at bedtime, they cannot be
for me. My blood beats this hot time

in another bed, another town.

A Newer World

The widow stands in fog and waves
at every boat that strays up the lake
this far. She drifts above the earth,
I've heard, this crazy frozen smile
stamped upon her cheeks, hair a mist
of white, eyes a vacant, milky blue.
She greets duck hunter chasing rain
across the lake. She makes skiers
lose their grip and fall as they
wave back to her. She has worn
a trail to the spot. The widow knows
the crushing, silenced home too well,
her shoulder blades sharp enough to shed
the husband's name if she can leave
each day to wander by the lake.
She calls them. She calls all boats
to drift into her arms, to slap
water on their hulls and move the lake
back toward her once again.
She begs the world to come again.

A Poem in Winter

I am more alone today than window's love,
but in this solitary, sleet-tapped stretch of woods
I take the comfort of one bird's full span,
the hissing slopes of white, eternal shapes of saints.
The sleet will hug me for the warmth
I thought belonged to horses lost in hay,
nostrils steaming with the yeasty crunch of hay.
The wind will comfort me with tunes
of oak limbs lost within a crown of clouds.
I will be in love with shapes below me.
Nothing green is left upon this world.
Spring will bloom white, horses will be white,
trees will be white. The woods await me.
I am breathing hard, alone, that same color.

Masterpiece Theatre

In this one, and English girl confides
to her diary that she seems incapable of love,
that every day her garden swells around her
more deeply, columbine and iris, asters perhaps,
lost among the topiary. Someone called Nigel
has lately left for war, and she wants to cry
every time it rains. Brought to you by
General Electric. We bring good things to life.

Souvenir from Paris

One bright pain and then a waterfall: Van Gogh
held it in his palm, the pigment ocher, texture
thin as shaving water. He mailed it to a whore.
But what then? I see it turned to stone
upon the shelf, tattered curio, this shrunken cup,
nearly black, not Dutch at all. Or with screams,
she tossed it out, through an open glass, a dog
shook it once and trotted on. Too horrible ---
a holy relic still hidden, phantom crow lovers
bring out once a year for worship: to hear mockery
as he did, hear the earth groan, believe the Borains
when they said Christ was one more miner.
It is lost, for all this circled dream, but I lean
into this life to listen for the brothers of sun:
anything that falls unto the earth will grow.
It hears my heart beat beyond all stone.

The Serpent

It lay stick-sill among the leaves
and watched the axe above it rise,
my arms high, monstrous face turned down
upon its solitary dream; its tight coil
held the angle of attack until I struck
its side with steel. The jaws gaped
at death, striking toward my blood,
striking as I did until it did not move.
I have always thought of myself
as a decent man. I always thought
that I meant no one any harm.

Scene at Home

Her hands swim among the dishes. Blue-gold fins
break the suds, her mother's wedding plates;
cups gulp full and sink from her sight.
The children catch fireflies in a Skippy jar
and her husband's paper rattles in the den
before he settles into every loss.
This is not the wave she dreamed, the dark-haired
man who stole her from another arm,
or the perfect scale and arch of marlin
in some hidden gulf. Her body did not wait
for eyes that roamed her, chartless with wine
or songs of Grecian sky like bone. No,
she left that home. And now she dives
among the brittle starfish bump of plates
and waits. She listens to the children
in the clothes of evening dreams and grace.
She waits.

Before the Last Robbery

Listen to me, she says: we will never
get away with this. He nods, knowing dark pain
sings only dark pain, that the singular cry
of birth was his last day of light.

I am so tired of being poor. She cleans
all morning, takes off every porcelain year
with cleansers. She cannot dust enough.

He sits in the recliner, the one their boys
brought last Christmas, motionless, with the gun
across his lap, seeing it all. Even now,
before they leave, it is all over; he knows
what will happen, always has. Her hat is frayed.

It belonged to her mother, and she thinks
of Easter, of the risen man
with scars upon his hands and feet.

Annie Mae, she thinks just before they go.

My mother's name was Annie Mae.

Into the Perseids

No, really, I'm fine now. You understand
how it is when speed hits you at a light
near home, that rushing to hit atmospheres
so dense they'll tear away the fire.
I was just coming home from work,
thinking about the little girl who died
of appendicitis in our second grade
when I began to fall. Everything
like that means so much. I flew
with everyone along the cloud line,
and we were only diamonds of collapse.
You felt that was once,
when we saw that man lying still,
near the river in New York. You fear
the holding line, the unchanging half-smile
of this life, then you plummet breathless
toward anything blue or green. This means
that you know how soon night will end,
that you are heading home.

October

I beg to differ
with an edge of fall.
I will sweep summer
off its dancing hooves,
recall slim swimmers
no more than girls
at the poolside grooves
in Madison. When you
hang beneath the blue
of sky or lazy waves,
only dreams can rush
the season forward,
love at one sad dance
or Custer, proud as daylight,
pounding down some ridge,
face all damp and flushed.
Only autumn tears this trance
of slender, loving girls
away at all.

Lines for a Passing Moon

Something ghost-faced about it
strikes me songless; the squint for craters
or the sad, oblong curve in haze
I watch tonight. I do not swell
like an estuary with its shrug
or kill clean as bone when, full,
it stuns the forest, invokes all histories
to cry and flutter upward. It is this:
I have never traced the motion
and arch where the moon has already gone.
No one ever listens so well
before a sound, or stares, dazzled,
at the road breaking back behind us.
I am so afraid.

A Mass in Time of War

When the V-2s began to squeal, I stayed topside
to watch. Everyone fled into the tubes, and yet
I saw the rockets come straight down,
like breasts, the flesh Prince Albert saw,
that made him grow. I called to everyone below
and said, don't leave me now! If you stay
long enough, you can suckle from the fire,
be cradled in the dark, forked flames
of the Mother Tongue.

The Kick

My father knew nothing of sports,
but when he kicked the football,
it almost never came down in the backyard,
flopping along contrails and star wash;
it rose beyond the trees so high
I leaned back to see and fell
upon my eight-year-old butt.
His form was poor but that leg
pumped once and a second-hand bladder
that had seen glory in high school games
went so high the sun took it away,
then gave it back, bouncing up along
the fencerow in my yard. Sometimes now
I stand in the early autumn grass
and wait for him to come, to show me
how pitifully simple love can be.

An Irish Landscape. A Girl. Regret.

Some cliffs must be singing, but dreams,
this wedge of light, sweep past her.
Hair red-gold blossoms in the sun
where she cries, windward, seaward, alone.

Skin calm as bone, she turns to see
his swirling ghost arrive, then spread
itself among the egg-white cliffs below.
Lately she had blessed his lips.

Lately she had gone alone to catch
his final, wretched breath upon a bed
In some gloomy boarding-house shade.
What a legend they had seemed to be.

Now all red, as eyes or hair, the moon
arises from the vast and sobbing sea.
She falls before the bowl of August sky,
that drains the laughter from this girl,

this sky girl who once roamed with him
in fumbled, fingered love along the heath.

The Fall of 1964

On autumn nights I recall
the aroma of brass, the way my uniform fit,
red on black, soft white sneakers.
I hear the sibilant gurgle of eighteen spit valves,
learn how to march in straight lines,
as if the earth were flat as football fields
and went forever in that one straight line.
When the coffee breaths shouted joy
I recall one girl's blue eyes,
and how high I stepped among the dreams
of true tone, all notes going forward
to that one brave arch. Everyone seemed
sixteen then, and I wrung from each score
a dream of chuckling woodwinds and brash cymbals,
one pure kiss in the shadow of the gym.

The Honeymoon Begins

I.

They move deeper into the world of gardenias.
Far up river, stolen on tarantula fur
and drifting apart already, Sam and Barbara
stop at a village and find the aroma of rot
everywhere, find the women stunned by light
through the lianas. Barbara feels crushed
in her chest from the steam, from sun
that drips on green leaves, and shrieks
of unseen animals. Sam goes for supplies.
This is the world, she thinks: things
unseen, dark stings and dark ferment
beneath their feet. Each step makes her
more afraid that soon, much too soon,
the river will lick her under
into the spark of stone and fin.

II.

The storm breaks above them, claws of rain
raking furrows in their wake. Sam oils
his heavy rifle, the barrel blue and thick,
whistles for the cries of jungle birds.
When he hears them answer, he feels strong,
a joyous bubble in his blood.
The boat purrs beneath him. He strokes
the gun and watches Barbara for a sign.

III.

She closes her eyes. Insects tickle her skin,
whisper into her blood the names of their kin,
and every silken dream her mother lied
breaks before her on the prow. What made
her marry Sam? She is afraid now.
She knows where this will end; gardenias,
Barbara will recall, mimic human flesh
as they return to forest, into the night.

The Other Hearts

I did not think you wanted me.
And though the night was choked with stars,
and stones grew upon my words
I came to you with penitence, hoping once more
to dance in dreams before your eyes.
But you turned from me,
and every swaying bud of spring
broke open for another man, wet with life
and rich with peace and dark earth.
I did not know how many hearts
beat within us all, that when one stops,
another brings us breath and singing.
Another heart will tell that all
who ever died in this precious, sorry world
died somehow for love.

Nothing by Hallmark

Oh. Paula said to drop her a note
when your schedule calms down, just
a line or two of greeting, some card
you found, but nothing by Hallmark,
something loud and obscene, something
that tells her why sunlight still fills
her bedroom each morning,
a long time after you've gone.

German Air Show Disaster

They came down in blossoms. Children sang
On fire for rain to wash the jet fuel down;
Women ran before their screams caught up
With them; flakes of metal struts blew
Across the runway. The sun snowed ash.
Their dreams of flight were legs upon green grass,
They called the names that held away
All shapes of night. No matter how many times
They dreamed of earth, for all years, all fiery days
Of life long passed, they will never stop flying,
Never find the speed to rise or fall or rise
Or fall. Each awakening, lift of aileron,
Bank of wing and roll brings August blossoms
Back to blaze the rutted, bleeding earth.
They came down into the wild eyes of men
Who saw their fingers spread and grow
Into the futile, aching grace of wings.

The Fire at Night

Cal awakens to the crackling tumescence of orange light in another room. All night he has dreamed of the world's end as Preacher Sheffield said that day in church, the bubbling cauldron fed by an angry God. Now he brings that world awake, into the October night. Martha will be slow on her silvered crutches, mantis without wings thumping from the flames, his poor daughter bent at unkind angles since birth. Cal listens. It's catching. A roar begins, dull as the distant rising chorus of damned heading for the sulfur and eternal pain, but when Cal smells the acrid smoke, he sits and screams: Sallie awakens to see the lights beyond the room like Christmas trees from childhood dreams. Before she can arrive from sleep they hear Martha's crutches thumping through the sparkling flames, calling their names against the fear. Old Aunt Emma totters in to see the earth consumed before their hands can raise a curse or bless the altar of the burning sofa in the living room. Cal is standing on the floor, the cold, cheerless slats, reaching for Martha when Emma screams. Sallie is so dazed she looks for her Sunday dress in the closet, thinking, Martha dear, throw away those sticks and be healed.

A Moment in December

Rain drips from my cabin's roof today,
and below the steps, oaks shimmer in gray light,
the creek mutters of a new channel; squirrels dance
to secret rhythms only squirrels can know.
Sky drips down the trellis of winter-bared limbs
where few sienna leaves still hang,
where skeleton veins once thatched with chlorophyll
will green no more. I could die in early winter
with a crown of rainfall fast upon my brow;
I could become the moisture on some lover's lips,
the leaves that wait until spring to fall.

The Confessions of St. Augustine, Florida

He was old and lost, slept among the dunes
and chewed sea oats until they were bread.
He stood on days of brilliant sun,
swayed and burned and sang the sea
until it eased beneath the farthest pier.
He spoke to crabs. He called each one
a name from some Midwestern town:
Buck, Louisa, Etta Mae and Karl,
and listened as they spoke to him.
He gathered trash and dreamed Spain
had come again to conquer every coast
that promised gold or miracles of youth.
In his softest sleep, he heard the stamp
of horses on the beach, the royal sway of ships
at anchor, armies without end.

The China Syndrome

Below the sound of your breathing
Below me it starts: the rigid strum
of this earth's final shudder.
I see the shell of earth, stained wine red
and thinning, then we fall through it
together, holding the fire of skin tight,
mine or yours or merely flame.

It isn't like wind. More like sea,
like movies of underwater volcanoes
bulging lava. We heat, then fall
through the earth's sweet dark regions,
gathering force, heading for the Orient.

And once we settle there, breath gone
from descent and flooding veins, words
come from a dialect I do not love,
from a country you have never seen.

In the Cabin with Two Dogs. Storms Coming.

He was lost in a ditch. My son bathed
his wounds and cradled him from a dream.
The other one is coal-colored, and no longer
dreams of squirrels against the floor
of the forest: she turns her eyes upon me
now when the cabin rattles in this rain.
Be prepared to move to a safer place,
the man in the radio tells me. Wind
could be damaging, hailstones pelt the life
from unprotected things. I translate for them.
I tell my dogs that sun has broken out,
that every baying note of darkness
has been washed away from their yard,
from the face of the earth.

Music. 1860. Bruckner.

I get home from the university at dark.
The chimney smoke drifts across the stables,
A cab clatters by on cobblestones, horse weary
Of the rain, of pulling this weight. Sherry
Tastes best on evenings of damp November chill,
But my wife stops me in the hall:
He's in there again, she says, in the library.
She is concerned, so I kiss her temple:
Tell Ellie to bring sherry and two glasses,
And Lucinda nods and eases away into rooms
Where coal grates glow. I walk to my library,
And he is seated by lamplight, holding
A volume, a sheaf of his own works.
Professor, if you please, he says in this accent,
This ridiculous dialect, would you please look
Over my Mass in F Minor? My dear fellow,
I say softly, my dear Herr Bruckner,
You must realize some men are meant
To follow the noble art of teaching; music
Cannot spring merely from desire any more
Than love. Ellie comes into the library
With the sherry, I pour us a glass, but he
Will not share it with me. His clothes
Are far too large, his fingers thick;
His eyes reveal that he knows this lie
I speak. He stands, bows stiffly, clutches
The sheets across his chest and strides out
Into the rain. I must prepare the orchestra
For Sunday, but I am distraught tonight,
Listening for my original heart to beat once more,
For sanctity in the arbor of my lies. Once
You say a thing has this much beauty,
Love of any music fails your fairest test.
Every wretched heartbeat sounds the same.

Excavating Bottles From a Cellar

The sound of my trowel like snakes on stone
brought him to the diggings: look, I said,
five old green wine bottles buried for years,
and a light bulb that even the pressure of earth
could not crack. If you twist the bottles
gently they come out whole, collected for a shelf
of colored light, antiquities to dazzle
those in love with silent, tomb-filled days.
He did not see the dark velvet lapels
by Victorian gaslight tumble drunken down the steps,
the woman inside who locked her heart
alone within the silent, weeping walls.

Which Beasts Shall I Become

This is the night I will die: the faint spark
finally snuffed out, and all souls I dreamed

winging out among the beasts. The animals arch
for any Philip they can reach, paw, fin, whisker

and wing bring into their blood my imaginary bone.
I give my disposition to some impatient wing

so it can ride the currents into cloud, then plunge;
I give my grin for this beloved son to otters

on their stomachs in the dew-slick grass.
I give the color of my eyes to unseen creatures

of the soil who break it down more fertile than before
beneath the sisterhood of stone. Into each nest

and den and sanctuary from the wind and storm
they bring me home. They bring my fitful singing

and my awkward loving arms back home.

The Beach in Winter

The wind shifts south. Trees turn silver
from the spray, buoys clang farther out
beyond the breakers, past cold gray sand flats.
Gulls are homing. Oh Christ, this couple
still in love comes toward me,
and what will I tell them. Chase flames.
Burn here in winter where the sun
aches for flames, lick the surface of flames,
yield to every shadowed fire. No.
They pass, the blue old women, too,
the lonely children whose bodies fit
them well so recently. The wind shifts
full of wings; rise and spread
yourself, Williams, show the silver trees
your kick, the lovers every sweet stroke,
higher, higher, into the turning wind,
where flames break, higher.

Snow Death

The car has stalled, you knew it would:
merely grinding of the starter now,
this feeble growl in every turn.
Cold will slow your heart, birds are gone,
no dark punctuation in the silver limbs,
listen to the silk of snow upon the glass.
You cannot walk so far. Cars go other ways.

Your mother love the flakes, let them sing
upon her tongue, mixed them with vanilla cream.
When she died, you dreamed snow.
She loved to slide, let go on ice,
and now you see the cheap ring
on her finger in the blue cold.
You buried her with that ring.

White will kill you, just as clean and dear
as black. Now your horn no longer even blows
and you lie down on the seat. When seeds sprout
once more, they'll thaw you out
and speed you home. Someone will look into
the blossoms of your open eyes,
say they promise another spring.

Trapping Beaver. 1831.

They drown. In the snowy water's swirl,
he stands and listens for those sounds.
Beaver catch the scent and cannot stop
themselves from coming to his open traps,
plunge beneath the world into water.

He is colder now, and far off the Sioux
are dancing for the moon. Last spring they
smeared him with bear grease, broke potions
over his broad, dark face. But now,
he cannot understand their dance,
he wonders if the shaft will sing of fire.

One comes closer now, drawn by the love
smell of the frozen air. Dive, he begs in silence,
got down and take this short-cut home.

For All the Saints

The sound of her stockings. Rubbed together
in the back seat, that catching, scratchy
sort of sound, the mystery of her girdle.
No, she said, or yes, one of those,
the sound of breath upon that foggy glass
enough to stop a pulse. Twin peaks
of her bra -- where do I begin to climb?

Edmund Hillary, tell me. Did you feel
sacred as you mounted it that day?
I felt lost and giddy as am herb-struck kitten,
rolling madly in the deeper grass.

We stopped. Her hair was flame, snakes.
I felt my heart go down below
some horizon as she smoothed her dress.
And I was beatified, became her legend,
knowing that I had somehow felt my first death,
that I had set out for this other land,
and made the trip alone.

The "Potato Eaters" Has Been Stolen

Their eyes go wild. For years they hung
in quiet crowded rooms, always hungry,
about to eat. What do they see now?
Bring them to me secretly and I will dazzle
their thick gaze with my dreams,
the fringe of wood smoke on this winter's day;
I will prop them by my creek bank
as I call the hawks down into their room.
They will not know where I will go next.
They will not know what happened to the man
who brushed them here. None of us,
none of the conspirators, could bear for them
to know. I will simply lie.
They will have no visible reaction.

Escape from the Colonies

I am moving to the England of 1940.
I will send you a postcard from the ruins
of Canterbury, tell you of the dark pub
where we sing. Women will give me
their thighs in covers, hum, as we lie,
"The White Cliffs of Dover," and say,
"Hush now, love, the first alert of the evening
is sounding now." Anything haunts us.
I will see the tails of the V2
and cry, "Look, a pip! By Jove!
Another pip!" I want to feel desperate
somehow, to watch the stones in flame,
to feel as if this endless life
were for or against something,
love, or tyranny, or anything at all.

Early Afternoon. A Woman Ironing.

The pin-stripe shirt seems faded now --
it's gray, not blue. She pushes heat into the sleeves
and rubs them, makes them flat as the sea.
Why, she wonders, did he marry me,
or why does he stay? Did he sight
me lost and full of drift and salt,
just take me home that day? Trees
outside her window dream of wind, at least,
will shade the lame, the limp, the halt,
whatever that can mean. No matter how hard
she irons, the color has no secrets now,
the wrinkles have no time. Why did he
shed these skins for her to wash?
And when will he come home?

I Was Twelve. I Wrote to Albert Schweitzer.

Dear Doctor, I read this book about you,
how everything is scared, every living creature
whether legs or wings, and I saw the photos
of your thin arms as they held this child,
this starving girl my age. And so I wondered
what you would think to hear from worlds
as far from yours as mine. I understand,
I said in my letter then, I understand that love
is what we glean from our hope
like breath from the air. I wrote to you
the best I knew, let the letter slip
into the box, went alone back home
to see its words all night: Lambarene, Gabon,
Africa. What if you read it, wrote to me
that my life was scared, too? I saw
the scene: your snowy grace, the letter slit
and your reply. Dear Doctor, three days
after that you died and took my words
into the earth. I do not know who saw
the letter, but it did not return.

Dear Doctor, I am writing you again,
a single living creature you may hold,
wings still full of dreams and air,
sacred as a starving child.

Night Wings

1. Setting Up Camp

The light has fumbled through my hands,
 day's long August heated light,
 and here on lake's edge I ring
 the cricket song with human sounds:
 a drum of tent stakes going down,
 gurgle of Coleman fuel, funnel chink
 and first scratch of fire along the box.
 You set the rods down beneath a willow.
 Rock on rock I make the fire rise
 and you mix drinks. The charcoal song
 of bourbon sets upon us. Listen, you say,
 the bass are leaping in their dark circles,
 far out and away. A milky moon dreams
 of all my words, rising upon water.

2. Interlude

We hear them. From the blackest boughs
 they carve our names in air, cry out
 that the crescent field beyond thin lips
 of sand has taken fire. We drink,
 only share the words a bream may hear
 in passing close upon the reef where hydrilla
 waves upward, upward to the faintest stars.
 Where does death begin? No, they call,
 you may not ask within this night
 for such a thing. Your hair is intertwined
 with cattails. The first motet begins,
 tree frogs tasting gnats like ice
 upon their tongues.

3. The Air is Filled With Mammals

Fear bats. Or embrace their angles,
 see our camp in countless frames
 of vision, snaps of hair and skin
 and glass; of wet reeds and tales tall
 as whistling bears, dancing, scraping air,
 just past where the firelight dies.

4. When the Lantern is Out

Who is there on the bed of water,
flying low along its glass? I hear
wing tips dipping down to stir it up.
I hear how you soar between my ribs
in dreaming of that arch, how you
move your arms against me in sleep,
among my bones at the edge of light.

A Girl Killed in Pan Am Flight 103

Hear me, Theo, I am calling your name,
girl who died in the air and left
my dream of faceless fears so cold.
I saw your mother cry tonight,
who loved you into life in singing
shouts of love upon the sheets.
I saw your daddy walk on the snow-thick grass
and try to hear your name again,
call it, and turn to see you
come into the light. Oh, Theo, gone
so early from the room, your bed
unturned, the ocean glow within your eyes,
I hurt for those who hurt for you.

Through an Open Door. Late Winter.

No snow this year. A mosquito clings to the door
on sticky fingers, up from my creek.
Heat breeds them, damp heat, cloying there
below the fern-spread sill. I wonder.
A year from now all men could be arachnid,
sprouting legs, spinning out their fluid
in circles from the trees. Or clinging
against some breast of cold air on a door,
waiting for the perfect beak to close
upon their wings. We change before
the sun comes out for good.

Words for Miss Woods

Your clock broke down on Sunday, Sue.
In a coma for a week, you must have seen
the girlhood fields surround that home:
endless worlds beyond where a sprightly gift
of children lay. On Sunday, when the ticking stopped
and green broke down your heart, the children
never stopped to fear what took you down.
Miss Woods will bring them cookies in their dreams,
hold a tissue to their tear-washed cheeks,
steer them away from those bad dreams,
they say. And I, whose son you sang,
whose flesh you held so tenderly when he was young --
I lay you down to rest in flowers
where the arms of earth are strong and green.
O child, coming back into your bower,
now I cradle you with children's dreams.

Nipples

You never get over wanting one.
The wet suck upon the night, creaky room
and dancing flames beneath one soft bed,
but suck is safety, dreams of natal brine,
floating. I want to drift toward Kingston
upon your proud flesh, kiss the lace of dots
around them both, helios, eros, fluid
of the sea below your ribs -- suck nipples
with each prayer, ask for the dazzling gift,
the port and drowning of your arms

Secondary Roads

We have been lost so long. I hold
the map to the April light, see nothing
but veins and capillaries, the countryside
beating with the breath of deep green.
We see signs among the fields,
ignore them as our shadows grow
with the length of days. We keep
making the same turns, each year
coming back, sure that every leaf
will be changed, telling ourselves
we have never been this way before.

Lamentations for the Morning

She rises toward the shore of light;
dreams like brine pull her up now,
dolorous at this clock's dull burr --
another day so fast alone. If once
she'd waken into stronger arms,
feel one moon-tugged sleeping breath
at her side, she would come up
singing, damp with dew and joy.
But now she feels the sweet womb gap,
spill her out of night again.
She lies among the tangled sheets
and sees her coming age within this light,
within this perfect, silent room.

Henry James in London

Fastidious boy, snappy dresser,
gut gone broad and speech so archly ripe with cues
of British lords, please listen to me:
earth is hinged with flesh and cord
of sinew, not parasols or drawing rooms.
Early on, some rough crew might well
have kicked your ass. Might well
have taken you upstairs to lamp-lit
drooping whores and fistfights on the green.
You need it so bad. You need nights
grimy with the stench of love and food,
drunken laughter, something that may cry
and peel and rut and scream and fear
every order in every room
in every house in England.

A Few Definitions

Huckleberry Finn: A Scandinavian youth picking fruit from low, ripe bushes.

Linotype: The kind of floor covering you tend to like in the kitchen.

Diskette: A young disk, a member of a club for refinement, for bridge, perhaps.

You are so clever to relate all this,
perched as you are, aloft and learned,
thundering and precious. Tell me then,
before the last car leaves,
tell in that groan of yours what
silence means, or why you genuflect
so piously before the mirror in your room.

Program: In favor of a certain standard of weights and balances.

Coffee: A drink when you have pneumonia.

Helsinki: A long way from heaven,
and nowhere near the tub.

Bach Briefly Regains His Sight

Sunlight on the cobblestones, slick from rain.
(I would listen to the rain in darkness,
cool on keyboard slats of poor houses.)
Shape of the church spires, majesty of ceremony
in the high church, faces of the choir as they sing
my *Passion According to St. Matthew*.
(Only the sound of the organ in St. Thomaskirche
for this long, yet to see its reedy splendor
this day -- carry me there on a litter to view
how pedals thrill a congregation in the faith.)
Carriages, flanks of horses steaming. Anna's face
or the boys come home, a crone's gape,
toothless, and a small girl in all her fineries.
Shape of violin and cello, bows over string,
dancing out the notes I wrote.
(I imagined God's pure face smiling at me
for what I've done, stern but loving,
like the sound of morning, or late night
when a storm has passed, and birds ring
the evening with their praise.)
Sunlight on the cobblestones, trinities blessing
as I see this room for the first time,
then the last.

Idyll at the Lake's Edge

The stove is lit, rich smell of fish
frying in the black skillet. Our boy
is out there lost in some heroic time,
leaping ditches, finding trails beyond us,
toward a time when we have turned to names
upon a stone. They rise so fast toward
the surface, breaking into newer air.
We sit in camp and hug this middle age
around us as the stars float down.
You are calling him now,
and all those stars
are singing in your hair.

Exxon Oil Spill. Caged Otter.

I was cracking clams with a smooth stone
on my back in the swells when it came.
A gummy darkness spilled over me. I dove.
I rose into the oily night, felt it clinging
to my fur and dove again, not knowing how
to come above my breath once more
in clear currents, of the cold, early-spring
Alaska coast. They gathered me up
from the inky field and brought me
to a cage and bathed me. Now, on land
and drowning, I remember all the fish
I ever ate, every clam upon my tongue
and water, water everywhere.

Power Surge

I have this idea, I'm moving
engorged shafts of sunlight
with my mind all day. Thor.
Like Albert Speer's lights
at Munich but in my fists
where I can draw bolts,
hurl them with a white roar
until the world in dark delight
comes to kill me in my molt.
I blind them in this monster's
rage. Toward the leader? Score!
No one can withstand the flash
of my dazzled, incontinent light.
I snap the singing harp of fear.
I blind you on that distant shore.

The Artist in Middle Age

God how I miss the promise
Of future great things,
The smell of trombone oil in the band room,
A girl's nearly-gone perfume,
All those chances to amaze.
I miss the wonder of winter fog,
The bodies sliding downward
In the lip of blue-white water
At the city pool, sliding swans,
My first and last compositions.
I felt the world shrink to me.
I discovered all art by myself
And changed it into a new blood,
A bright wind, a promise that
I would be among them all
And loved for what I created.
God how I miss the Bach scores,
And Shelley's breath, and the crows
Over Van Gogh's final fields.
If I were once again a young man
Suddenly, if I put the needle
In that solitary groove once more
And rediscovered the discovered world,
I would cry aloud for the joy of it.
I would do it not for first love
Or her small hand folding in mine,
But for the words, for the notes,
For the colors of the world on canvas,
And the promises I never kept.

A Morning of My Life

I am certain of rain, but certainty changes:
Feather pillows are a clot of foam,
Ignaz Moscheles is utterly forgotten,
The Rosenburgs die together again but unknown.
I will become rain or words, my daughter
Will touch my face in nouns, my son catch
A hint of my movement in the family album
Of memory. I wave my hands this morning
Just beyond our eyes to make believe the glass
Of this world reflects me. I am certain of sun
And the drone of seasons, but my smile is air,
And a snarl to the Carolina wren who lives
Beneath my deck with her warm eggs.
She does not know me. She believes that shelter
Will keep her safe from rain, that my words
Are the skeletons of rage, but this is not the case.
I am certain of a beating in my penitent chest.
I bargain with wind. If it should awaken me
After that last sleep, I will reveal the certainty
Of this absence, which includes my love.

Ravel in April

His delicate hands move the treetops
Around in awakening green today,
Raptors, bees, proud flat lizards out
To hear the chuckling of woodwinds.
He brings the swallowtails back home.
All the singing is wordless, dogwoods
Lift against the pressure of two oboes
As if falling from this great height
Held relief for the shuddering earth.

I feel migration in my slow movement.
I cannot bear this damp unfolding
Into new shapes or the old valedictory
Flight. They break with me upon the sound
Of sod dropped low upon a lid.

That dirge rests on other days.
Now I see quite clearly what he meant
By the sea and its folding white lips,
The afternoons when nothing at all moves
But a flake of butterfly, without wind.

In Memory of Raymond Andrews

I.

Our restless country shifts in its ice,
 Old friend. A January once more holds
 Me near the fires where black cats roll
 Up and over for a stretch. I bless
 That idleness and the letters of your name,
 Sink in dreams to your cool reef,
 Then rise against it. That laughter
 Has me waiting, for you might come here
 Once more with beer and magazines
 To my front door, all shades of delight.

II

I shook your soft hand that June
 Near Madison Square Garden. You wanted
 To spring for Irish coffee, but I left
 You and went up in the Penta twelve floors
 To bed. We might have gone back
 To O'Reilly's, as we did years before,
 And drunk all night. You slipped
 Past me down that last sidewalk,
 Rolling gait, no capacity for enduring
 The brotherhood of our failures, tired
 Beyond the traffic and the tearing light.

III

I want to bless that turning away,
 Its fatal separation, shake milkweed
 To stir our country alchemy; thaw
 The night back and go from there.
 I want you to sponge that last meal
 Off Margaret, have you lead the crew
 From Maria's south down the sidewalk,
 Ray. I want to change my mind now.
 I will go with you for Irish coffee
 And chart our Southern lives toward home.

IV

All that last night you wrote note
 For the disposition of your manuscripts, books,
 When autumn had come gold and red
 Back to Georgia. You took the weave of age,
 Spread that uneven tapestry half across
 Your house in the woods. You came
 Past old lapses, memories of baseball,
 Funny-papers stories from the Thirties
 When you and Benny were only boys
 In Madison. I consecrate all the layers
 Of that last long evening before us.

V

You came back South for that end.
 Half of your life in the city, never stopped
 To drive, arrived here broken up
 And lost to us by bus that season.
 I did not dream a solid darkness
 Had brought you home. The fresh words
 Gone, wild ache of new books faded
 To your shelves. I did not dream all
 The blank stares had come for you;
 The quiet distance had come for you.

VI

You went to the gazebo. The pistol
 Had the mass of stars. Words came.
 You were sick then, tired, innocent
 For your life of hurting anyone, anything.
 You spoke to that clear pain. Night
 Had come soft and cool, and each star
 Held down that black and ending sky.
 You held the pistol up and fired.
 The shaken earth swayed close.

VII

And now another winter, two years after
You fell. A cold rain rests on Georgia,
Sliding from the thicker oak trunks to moss
And the red earth and a bed of leaves.
There is no resurrection of your body here
Today. Your ashes and their molecules
Spin somewhere near me, and I remain
Alive and broken, or not, as the day permits.

My daughter you never met sips milk
By the January fire and calls to me.

VIII

I praise the artlessness of your life,
Ray, that spring in your step, how
As you drank everyone around you grew
Steadily more wonderful. I praise old films
And the Brooklyn Dodgers, your command
Of trivia, genuine risk of real affection.
I praise memory and age and wisdom
for my own purposes, my other life.

IX

Listen to me, Ray: my anger has gone,
But it took my breath to drive past
Your unexpected act. I want to say
I live in your memory, but all sure
Things break down to light and ashes.
I want to say your voice endures
In my hands, that I am your witness
Against this life, that in my quiet days
I hear your deep laughter outside
My front door somewhere toward morning.

I Want You, Reader. I Want You to Come with Me.

I am whispering in your ear. My lips are very close
As I touch your hair and let my prints slide down
The texture of each thickened strand. I smell you,
The slight afternoon of your cologne, your skin
With its fine layering of the day's swollen air.

I am whispering in your ear again. My lips brush
Your hair and then your soft lobes, and I speak
The wet syllables of affection. I lick your ear,
And you taste like memory. I say your first name
Three times, and I feel you lean toward that sound.

I am holding your face with both of my hands,
Looking in your eyes past retina and pupil
Deeper into your sweet macula, and I will not break
Away. The room is very still. You are not afraid.
You know that I cannot hurt you, that my eyes

Will not lead you into darkness. You speak, one
Slow movement, one pursuing labial, and I nod.
We are alone. No one will come to hold us now.
I am whispering in your ear once more. Come with me.
I will lift the splattered veil of constellations

For you. I will hold you when silence drops down
For those you love. I will pave your path with roses,
Fill your bed with a thousand heart-red flakes.
I am an unexceptional man. Take my hand.
Lean to me in this stillness, then tell me my name.

Under the Red Moon

He kicked in her door. The mobile home
Was rented from an elderly couple
In Alabama. The human genome

Has not been mapped quite this far.
The bodies were still so supple.
In an ash tray, the man's lit cigar

Smoldered while the room was mopped.
They'd have a motive soon, or letters
Might say when their breathing stopped.

Each summer night they tend to break
What relatives call their fetters
And leave behind the smoke and ache.

His name was Bud and hers was Mae,
I didn't catch much more than that.
None of the neighbors had much to say.

They'll rent it out again today.
They got his working gloves and hat.
A sister took his truck, her cat.

Remember

Please remember me to your Aunt Lou
I hear she has been unwell, please remember me
To your mother also,
I still have her recipe for funnel cake
Davy had his gall bladder removed
Last year and then he died
Julianne is pregnant
Please remember me to Fan
She rocked me when I was small
I remember it by the fire in December
It was a coal-burner
Please remember me to everyone
From our class, we heard that Tom
Had that depression
That Cin was paralyzed
When my Al goes on a trip I worry all the time
About him, well that's natural
Please remember me to Arlene
It's not so bad what happened to her
Many a thing's happened to me worse
But don't tell her I said so
The weather here is about the same
And the trees have not fallen
And the animals are all still alive
Even Sam our orange cat who is fifteen
Remember me to Paul
(I loved him when we were
Twelve and we held hands
During *Gone with the Wind*
O Christ I wish he would hold me now)

The River-Merchant's Wife: A New Letter

Madam, a swimming pool is not a deductible expense
For your arthritis, nor can we allow your meals
From the trip up-river to Pittsburgh where your husband
Had this alleged meeting with Carmine Rocco.
We will not allow you to keep the pontoon boat, either,
As there is a question of authenticity in the bill of lading.

When you were a girl, a tow-headed seven-year-old,
The world lay pearls before your skinned knees
In the form of adoration, but can you not appreciate
That those days are gone now? We have a photograph
Of you at the river's edge, rock-throwing, giggling
Like a child whose smile might inflame passions
Or immolate a port city. Your father took you as far
As Boyne City. All that is behind you now.

We have come for you and your husband, madam.
We have come to suck up your liquid assets.
We have come to make clear what is never made clear.

Rosie, A Plastic Dog

Your barque, stately solitude on rivers
I name myself, is worse than your
Sight. Doe eyes, drunkard smile, arms
Out for a hug and ears of sponge,
Human navel and thickened fingers:
A pig-pink replica of nothing, bald.

Some days in the winter, I'm called
Similar things. Old windbag, carnivore
For God's sake, careless in his dress
And manners, slow to hear a name
Behind my eyes or desk. Poor old soak,
More hopeful and useless in his shell.

The dog and I bid you this farewell,
Suitcase up to here with bones and socks.
A fine pair. We'll pass around the town
And head straight for the Great Plains
Where I'll send Rosie on for fish or game.
We join in that celestial crown.

The Sadness of Birds

I have grown old wondering about birds.
They awaken me, but who awakens them
Before light or wind? My dogs shrug
It off. In certain battles, Gettysburg,
For instance, witnesses say the birds
Go silent before the artillery begins,
Before the lines form for their deaths.
A whippoorwill hits those three notes
All night like a bugle call, the same
Articulation, identical dotted notes.
One mourning dove advances chants,
Soft, gray Benedictine brothers who hear
My breathing on the porch, unable now
To rise and shoulder all my duties,
To move out and take it like a man.

Saturday Afternoon

I invite the bees
To land on my fingertips.
There is salt. I am floral
In the late-day sunlight.
They can arrange themselves
On my sweating palms
In a graduation boutonniere.
They may sting me to protect
A queen nearby they sense
But have never seen.
Or not. The case may be
Irrelevant as they construct
Their penal cells for honey
And the urge for wild regret.

All of Which Is to Say

I am in full livery these days, waiting on periodic tables
and the glacial calm to descend: a colder silence than her eyes.
All the elements conspire. Argon licks electrons off the shell
of krypton. She rubs my skin off me. I am trans-uranium.

All of which is to say
 that I am stuck in this half-life,
 that I decay from skin to joint
 that soon my number's coming up
 that iridium is my cousin's cousin's cousin

My Scars

The air flows over my scars, a wet morning wind
To mark my navel and my sawed-up sternum.
They decorate me. I show my finger to the birds,
The one I cut at five upon a broken coffee jar
When I tried to knock the cold clay out. I show off
The place my brother hit me with a rock. My head
Poured its blood like oil in that sacrifice. I bare
The slice beneath my left eye, explain I tumbled
Down the stairs. The long one was my heart.

Yes, the circumcision, too, the vasectomy wound,
The hair-line slice where once I walked into a door
At night. The wind swirls past medulla oblongata,
Pineal gland, brain stem, the memory of a girl
In the movie house in Madison and how she held
My hand and laid her soft hair upon my shoulder.
And my eyes when I stood upon my toes and saw
My Uncle Sambo dead, borne by that narrow box,
His hands curved slightly, forever at his sides.

An Invitation to the Seals

I wish seals lived in our Southern forests,
Oily coats angling through the kudzu,
Cold barking on November evenings in light
Half of its summer radiance. I would
Come outside in eye-splintering August
To water my lawn, and they would be playing
In the sluice dripping from my well-house
Faucet. Or idly scratching, waving to us
With their slippery flippers, as if in greeting
Or goodbye. You have to think very hard to know
Which it is with seals, because they wait
You out. Their lives are pending. They dive
In the blink of your turning. I could see them
Dive into the fescue and go past roots
To the cold river that runs in the rock beneath us.
They would sit down there for months
At a time, sipping all the black water
And the cold rush, tasting the minerals
And the jewels. They would come back up
Toward the surface of my floating eyes,
Grinning for our absence from each other,
Saying all of us live in the wrong place,
That we do not know where to go,
Where to live out the balance of our days.

Season

broom sedge
faint chlorophyll shutdown, it's possibly fall again
here at the window with a large orange cat named Sam
asleep in my lap or nearly so

and Linda and Megan off to school,
I'm looking at my Richard Wagner medallion
and thinking of brass and Venice

because it's October again, I'd like to check out
in October like a drying shaft of broom sedge
the color draining from my green face
and a cat asleep on my shrunken legs

and I would think of neighbor children
in the cowls of bus-stop raincoats and the whispers
that old man Williams is very sick, he's let the grass
and broom sedge grow up in the yard

Sam III, the newest orange cat, will see my breath
grow shallow and leap to the window and say nothing,
just watch them disappear into the world
as we all do, and the light will not go out

that day or any other day
I want the children of music to bring me bouquets
of broom sedge, and I will hold them like a cat
and teach them what a lovely season

I have seen; I will say arch your backs against
my absence and love it and leave your scent
in my rooms like the memory of music

On the Death of My Shadow

He was the color of grass, but darker, like a stain.

I will never see his shape again on the roses
or the base paths, where he crabs along in the summer noon.

He stayed with me during the girlfriend wars,
roamed the Edgar Allen Poe hallways in the night
when I was raving. He fell down drunk once in college.

In all this world, there was perhaps a better friend,
the one who always stood by me, but he never arrived
to satisfy me like this wavering old phantom boy.

We held the funeral in a steel-poled tent. It's hard to say
how much the frail old fellow meant to me, but then
it's hard to say anything these days. I can agree that time

was hard on us both, that when he grew stout and slow
I never left his side and that in his final illness
I stayed by his bedside and read stories of light bulbs and sunshine,

the things that made us grow more closely together.

It's a peculiar world that spares us the intimate wonders
of this world. We are always two, and one of us will be leaving.

Climbing Up the Head of Jean Sibelius

I slept hard last night and dreamed I was climbing
Stone Mountain here in north Georgia, but then a blink
and I realized in was the head of Jean Sibelius
he was humming themes from the Poco Adagio
from the *Symphony Number Seven* in d minor
and I had rapelled down his eyebrows and he eyed me
and said something in vowel-rich Finnish words
I wanted to apologize, but then he's moving gently,
swinging me on my rope lower and lower toward his mouth
and I'm thinking Jean is going to swallow me whole
so I hammer in some pitons and bounce back up
and clamp my crampons in his brow and the scherzo
begins and he's roaring and swatting at me, and I think
that if I get to the top of his head I can nest
before he begins to sing themes from *The Golden Spinning Wheel*,
a symphonic poem opus 109 after the poetry
of Karl Jaromir Erben published as *The Garland* in 1853
but it's too late and I'm sliding farther down
along the crease of his smile what am I doing here
I could have climbed Leopold Stokowski and been safe
he would have waited until I was safely resting
in the crown of his hair, lost in that bright winter forest

Morning on Wildcat Ridge

I want a silent place. Moonlight on the paving stones
In the cloister is too loud. I mark off gunfire, heart sounds,
The cat groaning in his dreams of butterflies and fish.
I want no movement, no wind, no rumor of movement
Or wind. The wrens will paint themselves to the limbs.
Worms do not arise when the rain had ended, dogs
Do not howl or wag or bristle, and the jets hold back
In their ascent, shut down all engines, fade in contrails
Southwest somewhere. I want all domestic screams
Choked back, an Amish cow who will not even twitch
When flies go still upon the eyeball air. I want fingers
Stopped before the game of Scrabble can be ended,
A woman in her bath to hold one breast, as if to wash it,
Then decide that moving means changing, that sound,
Even the silent pop of soap bubbles is the end of art.

I want the body emptied out. I want an April sun instead
To galvanize the neurons, give them one brief shock
Then fall back into stillness, an unmoving clock.
I cannot bear the thought of dying. I could, I guess, be dead.

The Storm

I have read my fate in snow, inevitable white-out,
The blind wind whipping off the corners
Of houses as it builds ice berms around them.
I will go cold and take another shape myself.
The pathways disappear as their memories change,
As they bear the sun at steeper angles
And the tracks fade. I feel a cause for rejoicing
When we come to this singular color on Earth.
I read the billows as this season's Braille,
And its clusters of signatory dots whisper
That among the housebound old men in their shoulders
Are the quiet persistent lovers who touch the skin
Of swift flesh, those proud floodings, as if the day
Drilled down into an aquifer and drank it.
My cats watch the world eaten, erased by flakes
That surely taste of milk. They come to my lap
And spread upon us dreams of endless sleep
And coats smooth with the fine oils of youth.
I have read my life in ice and find a comfort
In the spars that break up from the lost soil.
I hear my blessed breathing in the absence
Of the world. I do not fear the bitter cold.
I do not fear my absence from another storm.

The Sounds I Would Bring to You

A propeller plane up there in the August night
Keeps muttering for the longest time.
The dog far down the dirt road coughs once
Or twice, then curls back down. A wind
From true north warns us of the storms
That will not quite arrive. A mourning dove.
My cats fighting in the bedroom with slaps
And hissings. Wall-mice shivering at the downdraft
From owls. I am no one's special sound,
Not the darling of my words. My daughter
Is asleep and still beneath her canopy bed;
My son has gone to college. My wife lies dozing
On the couch. No one is awaiting my arrival.
No one hopes that I will visit unexpectedly
Or bring them fruit or lines about my life.
I would like to slice an apple in your palms,
Part the curtains of your grief and bring you
Sentences from your favorites among the dead.

Hymns for the Spring on Wildcat Ridge

The earth is delirious this morning with its spring
Breaking; the red oaks begin their green breath.
In light I can tell the birds from bats.
The forest hangs its hats upon the shingled uprights
And though I do not hear the buds break open
They crack nonetheless, and leaves uncrease
Like swallowtail wings wet from their cocoon.

I do not open as I once did in April, but I know
That I will shed this bear of flesh that hangs on me.
I know that fungi even in the dry small room
Where I will sleep shall turn me darkly green.
I know that squirrels will chatter on my lid
And drop off remnants of their most recent meal.
I will come out of my evening clothes to swim.

Now Saturday owns me. My five-year-old daughter
Watches *Babe* downstairs and calls my living name
For more Captain Crunch. The trees are bathed
Pale yellow with pollen grains; shadows make colors.
Wildcat Creek spins off a titanium white glint
From the sun where the ridge falls off the rocks.
Fix me here in the mercy of your kinder memories.

State's Evidence

Severe thunderstorms today in Colorado,
But I don't care. Today I dreadnought
Up the Missouri into prairie and sod
With surveyors who hear that Kansas
Has disappeared with her corn, museum
Of Ike memorabilia, every square inch
Of Topeka. They lost New Jersey once,
Were already redrawing maps when
It appeared, soaked and unrepentant,
from the cockfights just outside Havana.
No explanations. Life resembles this
Kind of thing so closely they merely
Pick up the transit and start over.
Kansas could be hiding in the clouds
Next door, as I hide from the truth
About my body's witness to its heart.
We all break down, we move on.

Staying Put

I do not want to go
Anywhere this April day,
Not yet dawn beyond
A night of storms.
I pulled the thunder up
Over me, the blanket
Filled with noise and light.
I rode the splendid bolts
To sleep, the Siegfried
Of Wildcat Ridge.
We live here. I could sit
Through immemorial rain,
In the pealing silence,
Upon the church-bell years
And watch my hand-hair
Grow gray and twisted.
I could hold the black cat
In my lap and learn to purr.
I do not want to go,
Or tear my daughter's smile
Away, shifting gears
As I drive toward town.
I do not want to go.
I will never go.

Into the Tropics

He comes each summer for a tan,
But this season there is only a parochial rainstorm,
With Spanish moss that drips its syllables
In the sand one whisper at a time.
He stands before the mirror in the dark room.
Behind him through the raised window
He sees the slack harp strings of more rain,
Sees the anonymous furniture of condominiumia
Undusted by the wall. He walks away before
The eyes get him. A cardinal hides, cloaked up
Beneath the eaves, neck pulled in against the drops,
And he remembers something a woman once said
In summer, but he cannot recall her face.
Puddles are joining, leaking over silt and spillway,
Filling up hollows, metastasizing.
So this is middle age, the lumbering gait,
The reluctance to eat oysters in bed when the sun
Vanishes for three days at a time.
This is not the bronzing of his skin with heat
Or rust, but a slow increase of months and fears.
He will wait it out. He is not yet dying.

Sunday

Sunday was so slow and boring that Nadezhda Lvova took a revolver which belonged to her lover, Bryusov, and killed herself. Later, in an edition of her poetry, they said that "In Lvova's life, no significant external events occurred."

Today is Sunday. An ant crawls
Up the landscape of my left leg.
I should be practicing scales,
Coming to terms, constructing a nest
Of tea olive leaves and candy wrappers,
But I am too bored. I wait for venom.
My practically hairless knee confuses
This executioner, desert terrain.
I wait. A tick of sweat drips
From my chin to the porch.
I don't read Sylvia Plath's letters
To her mother. I don't watch baseball.
I don't invite epiphanies, could not stand
The dislocation or the effort. Explosive
Wings do nothing for me or turn me.
The ant arrives inside the khaki leg
Of my shorts, scouts the humid darkness,
Stings me twice so hard I wince
But do not rise or speak. A Sunday
Breeze tells me nothing, brings me
The same message over and over,
Of stillness and sacrifice and boredom.

Thrill

Concept of thrill

standing just past the last World War I bullet
in a trench, her hand in the movies at ten years old
when there's a clammy kind of happy fear
well drillers standing around smoking
you're paying by the foot there's this groan
from the damp red soil and a sudden liquid sound
and it's a gusher! as if the world felt itself come
up into the damp snatch of stars
not drugs I don't take drugs except your rare
dose for kidney stones not a thrill
but anyway

Veterans of Foreign Wars

I

I want to touch his face now,
The trenches and turns of our South
Fine upon those cheeks as pink as a girl's.
He stood in his black coat, pocket
Heavy with campaign medals. He wore
A greasy hat. His hands shook softly
Below the cuffs. The day was my youth,
The park and a picnic, sweet old men
Listening for their music or their names.

II

I remember his sweat and the smell of camphor
And moth balls, mouth working around,
A pink tongue lifting up the dental plates.
The boys gave out a savage shelling,
Long-range laughter for that awkwardness,
And I wanted it to end. I called down
Support from the air for his sibilance
And placed it on his coat to shine.
I held his breath beneath the oaks.

III

I cannot remember the war, his homeplace
Somewhere on the edge of town with jonquils
Or a tractor clenched up in front. Dust
Has sunk his bones into the front lines.
I cannot say a message has come to me
Past his gray brigade or if old men march
In their memory as I dream of him in mine.
Only this: a proud resolution toward fire,
And his hand, reaching out for ribbons.

Final Flight of the Great Wallenda

His daughter watched him fall,
Watched him squat and hold
The pole across his lap, then
Tilt and fall in San Juan
At the opening of a mall,
The kind of rope-work he had
Done for years at the cold-
Weather sites, in old tents,
The drafting, lifting canvas kind,
And she would look up
At his sliding step, and old
Familiar pride might stall
The world, but then he came
To work this Puerto Rican mall
And his daughter said to sit
When he began to sway --
He tried to settle on the wire,
But no one held the blame,
And then, like love, like art
You see but won't believe,
His daughter watched him fall.

A Warning

Gutter-snakes, blood barriers, footprints
In the alley, frayed cuffs: the hints
And clues are quick as the shadows.

A white, seashore clapboard house, black
Shutters, empty porches: before the stars
Come out, crimes are well in progress.

The fireworks are a cover. The bicycle blonde
With a blue halter top diverts attention,
The hummingbirds go off, in-line skating

Down the coast. My fingerprints are found
On my fingers -- very suspicious. My face
Decorates an old post office wall in town

As the employee of the year. I plot my assault
Carefully, sending out a verb to scout houses
Where a noun might be alive and singular.

I plant devices in the goddamned walls
Of mansions, clichés they won't notice
Until, too late, it's truly hot as hell.

Well. Crimes come in many fine flavors;
Larceny, for instance, or insurance fraud.
I won't limit my appearances to night,

My dress to bawd or crippled monger.
I'll take your child, your new golf clubs
As evidence that the longer you survive

In my memory, the more torments I plan
For others. (That was me at the pool's edge,
Wearing, for luck, a crown of thorns.)

Mother of Waters

I have walked around the water for several years now,
And I cannot say if it is light or vapor
Or the tears of rain.

I have become a pelt of black bear, and my oiled fur
Feels out the sound of water falling
So I may feed upon it.

The lake lies calm as a sheet of salt beneath my
Feet. I glide on the tips of my wings
And strike sparks.

No; it is moving toward the inevitable river path,
And I follow the icy rivulets fast
And shallow, beating.

No; the river itself is the water I roam about, asking
Current and pools for the names
Of those who foretold

My coming, for they are the liars of water, the grinning
Prophets of failure, for I have not
Known, ever, the footfall

Before and under me. Yet I keep walking in circular
Steps around the water, which
Spilled out with me

On the first day of my dying, which held me warm
And swimming up against
My mother's heart.

What I'd Do for You

Signal for me to cross the river at night
When you are safe. I will swim it.
Have the sentries take a shot above the water
To cover my betrayal. I will crouch,
Make bullfrog groans on the dry rocks
To announce that I am coming to you.

I will set my cerebellum in the pulling current.
It is not afraid to feel the catfish rise
And strike a memory or two. That confusion
Is all delight. Now they will not suspect
The water holds a creature of my loss
And vagaries, a dead pine branch, sinking.

Hold your hand up below the rhododendron,
Above the ferns. I will home to that flame.
I am the rock of your moss, and the fall.
Signal for me, and I will walk the rapids
And come out in the moon's soft jewels.
I will lay myself dead at your cold feet.

To My Wife On a Morning in Spring

The air has cooled over night, the comet is gone.
Our orange cat Sam sits in my lap half-asleep
And loving me with the soft moving air of his throat,
A distant and idling motor. A crescent moon
Is painted on the second pane of my study window
Where I also see my own reflection. My beard's gray.
Age has slipped up on us. Orange cats do not turn
Coats with the years, but we do, and I am not sad
From it. In the coming light I count a hundred lines
That must persist: trees, clouds, the sun, and fur.
I predict their resurrection in time's sweet grace
When I have calcified in my children's older eyes.
We have held on a quarter of this century in our vows
And brought new life upon it -- Brandon now off
To college and Megan, only five, still asleep downstairs
In her canopy bed, on which she sees pale Cinderella
Or a Renaissance vault of stars. She cannot believe
One day we will move on in this fine world where
The irises bloom or the coral azaleas open to the wind.
The fading scrapbook of our single life is theirs to keep
As seeds love the memories of their trees, a hopeful
Thing, really, nothing less than grace. I believe in grace.
I believe that we will live to see far-off seasons
The color of grass or even Sam. I step from the window
Through the moon and into that world I have received
From your hand. I take your heart with me through the trees.
We hear our children's sentences in the moving air.
The world shimmers in our eyes, and I cast off my body
As we hold this blessedness until the first of our days.

The Tides of Wildcat Creek

I am frozen at the edges today.
 The course of my creek escapes me,
 Going for the river across posted land.
 I have lost the map of my veins
 And capillaries; the stuck mitral valve
 Of our well-pump is a mystery.

Some days the trail just grows cold.
 Beach trees shed their carved lovers'
 Initials; I pass the dark landmarks
 Of childhood and miss the turn-off
 From innocence all over again. Water
 Is the track of ice. I flow along.

We sandbagged it last summer, saw
 A pool rise three feet reflecting green.
 Storms melted the sand away, changed
 The course. My own stones turned
 In the moon toward adolescence, calm
 Soft chime of the milkweed and wheat.

Gail Fambrough, I remember you.
 An appendectomy killed you in my
 Second grade class. They lay your
 Face among that straight hay hair
 And closed the rank of desks up one.
 I draw the contours of that lost smile

And do not grieve. You flow on
 In my secondary heart. I mention
 Your frayed coatsleeve to bring back
 The smell of creosote and sandwiches,
 Shape of old tree roots for a throne.
 A knot of rock choked me off.

I stare at Wildcat Creek to turn it
 South away from the Oconee River.
 No luck. My ice-bound hands hold
 A fragrance of mild regret. I am sung
 By the fading path. I am forever found
 At the far end of that trail.

Winter

I can see across the creek through gray bark (startled)
to the granite hill where rituals smoked out
 the Lamar Period Indians
 they came swarming up our side
 ants with blood hatchets and the attitude of smoke

no, that's not it, but some minor masterpiece
from Monet with thin gray slashings
 all wrist action and egg tempera
 little bit of burnt sienna there for leaves
 paler for my own hands as they reach

or maybe it's winter and wood smoke from my own fire
that I see drifting, mortuaries of oak and hickory
 and my dog down there near the creek
 rolling in the fog of meat memories
 and coming up toward me all dash and blood

The World Makes Sense

The world has this flow chart, how you meet things on the way,
unintended detours and victims, a sage floating on his beard.

You could say this hierarchy is planned, swollen with God
and full of wildflowers in the undercanopy of hardwoods,

or it's all accidental, sharps and flats, cirrus and nimbus,
fractals swollen, the particular clouds in full bud.

It doesn't matter which. To start with, believe in edges.
follow one until it bleeds the new shape of a some ragged season

and then say its name. You can change a thing by naming it.
Don't expect the world to make much sense. You'll be okay

if you come upon a wreck at the crumbling edge of some road
where the driver, a woman named Jane, is bleeding roses.

The Young Writer

You recall those mornings, the Wagner brass
Filtering from the neighbor upstairs, her shower
Coming on like Debussy, and you knew
She was sliding from her nightshirt and panties.
Plump, like a Degas dancer, an elegant stride
When she came out each morning and smiled
At you -- she took the bar of fragrant soap
And pressed it to the cloth. You sipped black coffee
As Hemingway did at the Dôme and pretended
You would be a writer like Ezra Pound
And start a little magazine in which girls
Would see your words. You would sit distracted
By the apple tree behind the house and write
Verse in brown ink and pause for inspiration
Or an angle of the sun to strike your sensitive
Face. But then again, you mostly remember
The sound of her feet squeaking in the tub,
The rent collector already in his car and coming over,
The fictions of her touch, the stories you would tell
Bill Styron on the Left Bank. You bring back in order
How she did not love you but might have,
How she did not come to your pose of writing
But should have, how she never called your name
Or knew that she was your own Fanny Brawne.

For the Resurrection of My Youth

the sheets came over me, rose clouds
 and lord of dawn, where have I been in this paleness,
 a joy of blood-lilies, memory scrubbed out
 with chalk erasers?

I have tried six times to attach myself
 to permanence oh ho, what a story that is

and all the privet love I have wasted
 returns in the color of Florida violets. I dream of palmate,
 of lobes, with Ravel in the early afternoons of this life

and my dearies I lay out before you
 a shimmering bay a sheet of silvered water

and all the native azalea blossoms, purple clouds
 without my glasses in this smeared vision;
 but there is nothing to mourn in my palms

I have leaped for one celebratory pyre
 in whose cool honor I always fail

I will always fail, and the ruined bodies of my youth
 dismiss me, and I carry Monet with me toward the creek
 so close I smell the pale crimson and ochre and smoke

I am not here before you, or spilled in words
 of permanence a sheet of silvered water

rises over me in the ache of my winter bones
 and I will not be with you always in these sharp days,
 and I will not be with you now, as you rise to leave

Red Duncan Yo-Yo

What descends has risen to me again
In my childhood backyard. Translucent
Spinning circle, the spirit of an orbit
As I learned the motions of the earth:
I learned the swing of cradles. Walk
The dog on a cool-tiled school floor
Or turn that twisted string over the falls
To dazzle a certain girl's glance.
What descends rolls up my heart.

The string broke. It spun into an oak
Heavy with mistletoe. I threw sticks,
Fired a stream from swift nozzles,
But it could not fall back to me.
I saw it swing in the wind for years,
Pendulum measuring me for all turnings,
The rotation of my stars. Somewhere now
I am rolled to that quiet boy's life
As I fall once, then roll on up the line.

Drowned in a River

Her hair floats in a crown of foam, foot jammed
Hard between the moss-rimmed rocks. For two days
The rangers keep all walkers off the bridge
Above her heart. I try on her father's will.

In age we carve ourselves into a dwelling past,
Where images come like sweat-soaked nights,
And we stop, graceless as a swan frozen in its glide
On ice or through a photograph. We try on her father's will.

She swims unknowing from the upland rains
That ran off cotton fields with chert projectile points,
Potsherds stamped with heaven's everyday designs.
She calls me. I rest and weep upon her father's will.

Every river should be dammed and drained and so avenge
This shattered night, every cloud shot down from every sill.
They flow on anyway, and I cloak myself in speechless
Shame, can't say a sodden word. I try on her father's will.

A Modern Love Song

I will not buy
A product until I know
Its purity, based on standards
Set by some authority.

Alum, for instance,
Can be adulterated,
Potato chips cut thin,
Oil and salt saved

For communion services.
Or Bach. Who wants
Brandenburgs without
The full choir of violins?

I will not buy
What you say
About me until I know
You are a liar like me.

Then we can lie
Together about what
We contain and how pure
Our intentions are.

My love is not store-brand,
Skimmed off, shot through
With impurities. It does not
Even exist, but that is

Acceptable to everyone,
Is it not? Can we not agree
That pretense strengthens
What we call love?

That is why I am saying
Without reservation
That I love you. I love you
With half of my being.

A Parable of Growing Old

My rake's old man teeth are gapping:
For every oak cluster I bag, three escape windward
Toward the woods. Well, says the rake, I swanny,
I thought sure I had them ones, aye God.

No such thing. People don't even think,
Much less rakes, and old rakes surrender to landfills
Or wind up leaning against a tree until they grow
Together in a messy synthesis of oak and poplar,

This cancerous aggrandizement that has no use
To anyone anymore. Which points out again
This morning when I am up again long before light
That everything has its uselessnesses, which may be

One of the most important lessons I have ever
Learned. Or maybe it's because I cancelled my
Dental appoint again, pushing it into January.
Everyone's teeth hurt when it gets that cold.

A Proposal

Dear editors: I would to propose an anthology of American poetry
In which all of the poems would mean nothing, have no implications,
No flowering quince, nothing staggering downward to darkness
And so forth. There could be rhyme or some kind of real rhythm
Maybe, and we'd balance the selections as always on the basis
Of gender, race, sexual preference, nationality, and those who love
Cats or dogs. All of us are one or the other, especially about cats,
Which let's face it are better companions than dogs. In fact, now
That I think of it, all the poets in this anthology are cat lovers,
And in fact most (or nearly all) have raised show cats, especially Burmese
And Persians. One heterosexual woman from Denver has shown
Harlequin Great Danes in the Rocky Mountain region, so make
Of that what you will. I do not propose that as a symbol of any kind.

Symbols are no more than cymbals, let's face it, editors.
The brassy clash of "look at me" that a professional poet can spring
Like an unsuspected metaphor (the snap shut of a mouse trap, etc.)
Is so boring now. This anthology will make no such points.
Why? Because there is no subtlety in the world, no sense of love.

My wife told me to say all that. She's the one putting this together.

A Text for Geography

For my friends, Asia takes the place of suicide,
The humped shoulders of the Urals lethal as babies.
They want to know if berries come in clusters or wads,
And I haven't been able to find out. They hate me.
They aren't really my friends. They push strollers
In the park with watermelons inside cooling, needled
Full of vodka and nested in ice. There is so much to discuss.

I am sick of geography's radical whims. I want control
Of my life and who my friends are. Every day
New friends are assigned to me, and they handle me
Like a topography map, marking my south and north,
Turning me toward the blades of moon and ice fields.
They report to the commissioner my exile in Asia.

Then they can say they saw it coming all along,
That in my darker moods I drank too much, sipped melons
With straws thin as needles, that I spent time straining
To unhitch a vein from the fruits of the world,
Plunge something sharp in it very quickly,
As if to kill it or drain everything sweet from the inside
Out.

Being Afraid

I am afraid of the genuine, of being kidnapped by priests
 Who will order me on pain of death to confess my pride.
 I am afraid of what dwindles. I am afraid of germs
 That have turned my co-workers snotty and pale,
 Wheezing up the stairs like walking pulmonary fibroids.
 I am afraid of discovery, of being put on the stand
 By some celebrity lawyer and made to admit my life.
 I will deny it and say I am dead, never lived, am a null hypothesis.

I am afraid of crazy people with a glint, who go manic
 On me outside a cafe where I stop for a hard roll and coffee.
 I am afraid of falling or fainting or forgetting.
 I am afraid a dryer sheet will sneak out my pants leg
 As I give my Nobel acceptance speech in Oslo
 And the tittering will begin, grow deafening as they point.
 I am afraid of love as you are. I know what it requires
 And I'm not up to it. I never was up to it.

I am afraid of seasonally adjusted crime statistics
 With their per capita burglaries and grand thefts-auto.
 I am afraid to see my name in the papers under the heading
 "Those who did not go for an annual mole check."
 I am afraid of acids. They intend to etch me with formulas
 I can't explain, that will ride up each leg, down the arms.
 I am afraid of Franklin Roosevelt's "We have nothing to fear but fear"
 Speech. I can smell the man's cigarettes. They haunt me.

I am afraid of picture frames and their limits,
 As if the image they enclose is the only world among many
 And somehow I missed it, wrong train, seeing it float past, laughing.
 I am afraid of relatives. They want something from me.
 I am afraid of what seems connected secretly, like worms
 And spaghetti noodles or mitochondria and swimming pools.
 I am afraid of the penitential and the unrepentant.
 I am afraid of the universal and the minimal and their definitions.

I am afraid Joseph Stalin isn't really dead in his glass coffin,
 That he will blink like Sleeping Beauty and awaken murderous
 All over again. I am afraid that past and present don't exist:

What always is always was or something--to find out
 I am dead and alive at the same time or will never die or be alive,
 Like Jesus and the frozen lambs on sanctuary glass.
 I am afraid that a Portuguese-Man-of-War is hiding out
 In my hedges, waiting to get the drop me as I go to work.

I am afraid the FBI will discover I ordered a Pocket Pussy
 When I was twelve and put my picture in the local paper,
 A repeat offender. I am afraid of the men who wear
 Tailored suits and drink martinis until three and call it lunch,
 Of small monsters like Mozart in their cuffs and brains.
 I am not afraid of drowning, but I am very much afraid
 Of *realizing* I am drowning and being unable to surface
 Like a girl in a chlorine-drenched swimming pool.

I am afraid of being mistaken for a Pilgrim and ordered
 To plant corn and fish heads, then in spring having cod
 Sprout from the loam, all sunny scales and wriggling.
 I am afraid of saying something tasteless in elegant company.
 I am afraid of being old or young, of living or dying,
 Of paying to see a movie and finding out, eighteen minutes in,
 That I have seen it before and worse, that this movie
 Is the story of my life. I am afraid of that spectacle.

I am afraid of starting a crop of cancers. I am afraid of pearls
 And oysters. I am afraid of dogs and commemorative stamps
 From the British Empire. I am afraid my next waiter
 When I eat Tex-Mex will be Beethoven, so unhappy
 That glass bricks from the front facade burst like soap bubbles
 As he howls. I am afraid of singing women on their rocks
 And wondering how to get them drunk, into their fins.
 I am afraid of peace in the valley. I am afraid of being lost.

I am afraid of being found. I will not fear you,
 But do not turn me in.
 I am afraid of what I might do
 Then.

Aging Time

A cold rain plays the lyre of oaks this morning:
 Greek music, a pale overtone series of mathematical equations
 In a grove where the Hitchiti once danced
 Or an after-plowing breakdown broke down near morning.
 I'll take my dawns with salt. There is no difference
 Between seasons and seasonings today, missing church
 Because something is that edifice has died,
 Just as it has died in rain among the oaks.

I want lines with a classical turn, garments like albino pigeons
 Or the skies of Greece high above cliffs crumbled
 With centuries of dancing. I want to die in clover
 Gnawing sticks of hard-curved cinnamon,
 Or beneath the new hospital sheets where my feet will begin
 To glide upon their own instructions.

I'm tired of spending all my nights
 Calling out to Wallace Stevens, asking when he meant
 With his imperial and clerical words. That was his control,
 The death in the sanctuary, the dance, pale windings of India,
 The old farmer climbing down, bent bone on bone
 And heading for the house that has lost its savor,
 Where he will sit in his recliner, push the dusty glasses
 To his forehead then feel his feet grow cold.

The rain is not salt. Oaks and sapling poplars sorrow.
 The Hitchiti are all in the ground. Church does not miss me.
 Beauty does not smell of cinnamon or fit us like recliners.
 I cannot name what has been pouring into me lately.
 But it has not come from love, and I will not give birth
 From it. Why should we wrinkle into memory
 Is what I am asking. The rest is just dancing.

Morning Argument: A Love Story

The taste of winesap apples has come between us,
 The coffee breath of a winter morning before work,
 The drama of retribution, the comedy of leaves.
 Lives unshape this predisposition toward happiness,
 By which I mean the lives of ourselves and others
 Who model the good and estimable as we live
 The harsh and plain. As in: Take your intentions
 And pretend they resolve into the window light
 Of Dutch paintings, cloaking hands and shoulders
 Of women who, turning, stand still for their portraiture.

You age with me into the false promise of bodies.
 We shop at every mall for replacement parts,
 Hands, hearts, refocused memories, better feet,
 Not better shoes. And the greatest of these is touch,
 Which you deny, repulse as if the smell of apples
 Is the slavery of orchards where hands grow blank
 With the scarlet rupture of picking. The sky crumbles
 On our separate cars. We leave another touch.

By what right have we shed the fortune of hope,
 My old lover, by what alchemy have we bent
 Into the shape of winter trees whose apples have escaped
 To pies? We have evolved into the sinecure of lies
 Yet know all buds will bear another shape in time,
 If there is time enough, if we come back home
 In another season, the one with leaves and sun.

So: Let us sift our awakening parts into something like reason.
 Let us age back into touch, becomes the wines
 Men praise for body and fullness, saying this one
 Stayed knit into the vineyards just long enough for love.
 Let us sip that fruit as if they were plumped up
 By the gods who brought us, heart on heart together,
 Long before the apples drew their bees, then fell
 With heartsick loss and trailing scent into the earth.

Bats in the Attic

I awoke my wife just before five
And said I thought there was a bat in the room
And she asked if could be a mouse in the suspended ceiling

And I said I guess it could be
A mouse, but it would have to be running very
Damn fast, almost flying across the other side of the ceiling

And we listened and there was
Nothing else, no wind or rain, no trees in there
With their silvered caterpillar tents, no tame deer grazing

And turning to look at us, odd
Hairless creatures, no scrimshaw contrails cut
Into the boards of the floor above, which is our great room

No passive wives, sullen husbands
With their cigar dens and detailed coronary plans
To cut the old lady out of the will in favor of Cherita,

A girl from Puerto Rico with glitter
On her eyelids. No Christmas meal cooling as kids,
Supposedly already here, are taking their time in Tulsa.

My wife went back to sleep.
I waited for days to hear the helicopter sound again,
Like a madman beating his breast and crying to anyone around

That bugs are crawling all over him
But *on the inside*, just beneath the skin's surface,
Where you cannot get at them, and they travel light

Cancer

Cancer frequently kills itself in a hideous way,
Eliminating the host and finding itself a buried garden,
Airless, perfumed, and saturated with non-toxic chemicals.

Is this battle over, then? The killing of cells and resurrection
Of uncontrolled growth? There is a natural process
Called programmed cell death, meaning nothing lives

Forever, but surely cancer has a better strategy
Than to burn down its own house, to blow up its car,
To kill all its relatives, and put a gun in its mouth.

But it doesn't. Cancer is a fat man who can't stop eating
What makes him morbidly obese, and it does not enjoy
The approach of death but can't do a thing about it.

It drags its body toward a cliff somewhere in, say,
Iceland, where there is nothing but bitter cold above
Or below, and which way it goes doesn't really matter,

Just as we suspected. Advice: Stop weeding those gardens,
My friends and do not await the fruiting season with happiness.
We are always ready to jump, killing off our own kind.

Car Wreck

She sees the world arriving in a moan of fog:
Once again she has dreamed back the wreckage
Of her daughter's life, the cry for certain speed,
Approaches to escape velocity, hard curves.
A phone in the darkness. Wind in the limbs
And pecans falling on the tin roof like drops
Of bullet rain: These are the emblems of disease.
Once again, I am losing my only girl.

His voice was unlamented on the phone, a report
From what his field might bear on any night.
Imaginary sheriffs unbroken as they sweep her blood,
Her daughter's blood, from the shards of light.
The woman, the girl's mother, stood in the hall
In her flannel housecoat, squatted into tears,
And thought of Charles and his shapely hands.
Once again, I am losing my only girl.

The car's wheels were spinning, tail lights bright
As dragon's eyes in the gully. A shriek of siren
Found its vein. And inside the car, new rivers
Built among the cans and clasps flowed short streams
And dried into alizarin pearls. And her voice was not
The voice on the telephone. There was another man,
And men will take the precious with the sane:
Once again, I am losing my only girl.

Now the mother walks in night upon the surface
Of the fog and sings out. The music never shapes
Her daughter's eyes. The music never penetrates
The veil of white on white that floats among the trees.
She sees a shadow bent to grasp a penetrating fear,
But knowing is knowing. There is no daughter here.
"Spare no pity for the spared," she whispers on her knees.
Once again, I am losing my only girl.

Cat Genealogy

Tabby, tender in the fieldstone chimney of a house
Lately blown fragmentary by Union artillery, your
Progeny will honor you: That was Mother Paws

Who cuffed and clamped the swiftest mouse
By rainfall in night, circled up the mewling pure
Kittens in a land where breathing was against the law.

Mother Paws, begetter of a fitful brood, kind calico
And deaf pearl, growing and wandering the fields
To come back years later, Odyssean, inspectors

Of the past. They will gather around you and grow
Into fur and fang, tumble where the hunting yields
Wide mice who scatter without a cat protector.

Love is a suckling brood, who knead your underside
Into sweetest bread. It comes back half recalled
Centuries beyond the fieldstone chimney of a house.

Milk is the substance white with liquid pride.
Some will curl among the pines, others mauled.
Some will write your tongue upon an honored mouse.

Common in Your Sight

I want you to know how much
You have meant to me. I am sorry.

Everything is timing. I have to be gone
By dark or I will come back, and you will

Hear my steps on the icy sidewalk,
Slow and fading, reluctant to admit

I have been wrong in my lifetime
About scientific theories of stellar winds,

About the length in inches of meter sticks,
About the color of old lovers' eyes.

I want you to know that our ancients
Were right about the sun; it will unmask me,

Giggle at the shape of my cowardice.
It will say that I was going away

Forever, or at least a very long time,
But that we are bound the way history

Books bind a succession of kings,
And that I can no more leave this context

Than throw my crown in the nearest river
And become common again in your sight.

Communications

*Three men replacing guy wires on a cellular telephone tower
plunged 100 feet to their deaths after a rope used to hoist them
to the top of the structure broke. --Associated Press*

I.

The earth spreads out in January Arkansas below them,
Not high enough to shape its curve, but shuddering with air:
Cold winds make the tower tremble. The man behind backs
Up his truck, rope snared up in front to raise the bucket tower-high.
Beer talk, perhaps, then the ghost of breath as they graze
On thinning words.

You can hear the strain not long before
Something breaks, a groan against the lowest clouds,
The dripping sound of wax wings. They must have known
Two seconds, then, the final strain against its weight had frayed
The rope. A screaming break, the men rolled out like dice
Upon the velvet air, then the sense of not moving,
But the earth coming at them with sickened speed,
Iron cheeks whiskered with the trees.

The rope slumped down,
A dying whip that left its lash among the higher rungs.
The rope moved off to shed its blame upon the sheer plunge
Of gravity. They were born through air, through time and cloud
And screams along their twirl rising from below.

II.

They spoke in that unspeaking: sentences spun upon the light
In a language of towers, each to each knowable and discrete.
They sang of pain and memory, of their changing shapes
Elasticized by the drop. They became a loss. They grasped
The laddered slats, missed that hold.

Those boys were a bold
Lot, give them that, they'll say around the elder stoves.
They went up hawk-wing high in buckets every day
No more afraid than climbing steps to pick some arbor fruit.
But *they* were not the ones who learned to fly
In January's Arkansas, on our stiffening wings we spread
To catch the steel we cannot reach.

That screaming sailed
To towers strung from state to state, and it said nothing
True about fate or how we fade but only that our time
Is changing every time we fall, and that each collapse

Confession

I have been wanting to tell you this
For a long time, but the time never seemed right

Time's like that, malleable, fusty, the pale hiss
Of snakes in the perennial beds at night

You always take everything the wrong way
So that if I try to explain the spin of quarks

You will think I mean it's time to pray
As if in public we should parade our quirks

But it's not about that at last, and you, of all
People should know what I am going repeat

Now, the incantations of the beloved in fall,
The dire consequences when anything does not beat

So prepare yourself, my multiple darling one,
For something of a shock, or don't as you wish

I know that time has turned me to the snarling son
Of evictions. I am waiting for your final kiss.

Confessions for the Last Mile

This is my cage
Which is easy to flee.

This is my land
Which I do not own.

This is my girl
Who loves someone else.

This is my field
Which I have not sown.

This is my light
That glows in the day.

This is my dark
That warms half the night.

This is my courage
That fears for its breath.

This is my sorrow
And this is my fright.

This is the man
Who was sweet as boy

Now haggard and grim,
His chin growing gray.

This is his service
When mourners rejoice.

This is the song
Of the pit's final bell.

Or maybe the clang
Of his opening cell.

Cotton in the Ears

I.

They found her body in a sudden shape
 Next to a night stand: The wound was gaping, dried off
 By then. They searched the room, found evidence
 Of powder burns on the bed where she had test-fired
 The pistol into her mattress, through the comforter
 And sheets.

Lovers had not left their stains. She knew
 The sound of gunfire in the small room of the small house,
 And she could not bear it, so she stuffed her ears
 With cotton: They found her body just that way,
 Cotton-eared, as if she'd hear the final shot.

II.

We do not see the snake that lifts its spears in final rage.
 We do not recall, in emergency rooms, the brakes
 Of the other car. We do not taste the poison while he hides
 Grinning in another room and waits for us to gnash the peas.
 We do not quite believe in our death.

That's some fiction
 Off a rack, next to military rows of chip bags and cigars.
 We do not smell the fire before the floor above us falls
 In, and the contents of that world collide in flames.

III.

At first you think you won't do it, then the cotton comes,
 After you have test-fired the weapon, and you stuff it deep.
 If you do not hear the sound of his rude architecture,
 That city will not rise.

Then you've stuffed them full
 And the room pulses with its silence, a timid thing.
 You think, once, how they will avoid this room now
 Because of what you did, and you think of the red field
 Where the cotton burst, boll-ripe some summer day.
 You hear the shades of dead relatives.

They will not hear
 The shot, either. All over again, they are looking at you
 With the look you know too well. They are turning away.

Cusp

Who knows me knows the sorrow of love,
 The fragrance of rivers all flowing away
 Toward my familial graves and the one
 That awaits the name of their descendant.
 What date shall we engrave when love was lost
 To him, when he was lost to love?

My back hurts like knives. It's 4:30
 On a Monday morning, and there is a knot
 On my shin, and my depression storms full force,
 Flags whipping in the delirious breeze of fear.
 A week from Christmas: This is your patrimony,
 Boy, the breakings, the broken back and mind,
 And you will never heal, so just float now
 In the fragrance of these rivers whose motion
 Is the motion of old men's bones.

I feel as Pablo Casals did when he played
 "The Carol of the Birds," and people wept,
 But his pain was a shearing force, not this agony
 Of ridiculous weekends and frozen dens.
 I keep thinking I'll awaken on the other side
 Bound and shot full of the martyr's arrows,
 And I will love that death more than anything.

I will adore that wicked suffering--but no.
 The real curse of the gnarled is to see themselves
 Whole and fresh, potentially in love and loved.
 I wish I had a better sense of humor and less pain
 But how do we say where anguish starts
 And the mocking laughter finally flows away?

John Berryman in flight, Robert Lowell taxi-bound,
 James Dickey gasping in the adjustable bed,
 Randall Jarrell finally in the brightest headlights,
 Vachel Lindsay gulping down the burning draught:
 They were bound for drama or from it. Let me delight
 In the sorrow of my iniquity. Crank up the horror
 Of what is not love but it not anything else, either.

December

She is still alert toward dawn: light climbs the ladder of trees
Rung by rung, but she lies awake crying from romantic movies.
She is the heroine. He will turn to her at the end, suddenly
Aware of her beauty and value, that she has never been so cold
As she thought. She melts, beginning with her lower stomach,
And it goes on until there is nothing left but love and brine.

The morning is brittle with sleet. Hedges creak like old bones.
Limbs may break, and the power could snap off with a crack
Of transformers. It will not matter then. He is coming to save
Her from the water and pills, will drag her away to love
And hospitals, then a dinner of elegance and warm bread
Penetrated with flowing butter and the aroma of fields.

Here comes the good part. She is walking on a city street
Alone and pale with sorrow, and he is coming up behind her
In a long camera shot. All the others know he is coming,
That he will catch up with her at the corner of their first tryst,
Enfold her, make declarations. The sleet changes to snow.
The music is rising. She misses that perpetual clue.

How do we miss what is aimed straight toward our lives
For light years, the genuflection of divorces, kids in jail,
Parents falling dead alone? How do we walk right past
The only happiness we might ever know? We do not, she
Thinks. It finds us. We are that movie where love always

Comes back around even when we have thrown it down
To writhe and die. She takes three more pills, they slide
Down her throat like pebbles of ice, like the diamonds
He will give her when she slows enough for him to catch
Her in the crosswalk, turn her shoulder, call her name.

Dogs Watching a Girl on a Trampoline

She hunches down upon the drum, her muscles spring
Across the black elastic shore--or is it some expanding eye
That blinks the child upward? Dogs know what flies,
The soft inverted swooping things, crane to see a hawk
Dip toward the plumpest puppies, rise on two weak legs
To catch one in a glide. They watch her from the grass.

She has been flinching and earth-bound before now,
A small creature with turning eyes, paws rising back
When jumped upon with joy. Now her brown curls float
In the sweetened air of an early autumn afternoon
And the acrid smell of burning leaves lifts her high,
As those earthbound, rooted things shake themselves bare.

Where could she be going that she would so happily
Never quite arrive? The cinnamon tops of the trees,
The clouds shaped like yard-torn socks, the insect paths
Where lightning bugs lilt in the panting weather?
She leaves, she returns, she never minds that this road
Leads her off the grass for such a short, unmodulated flight.

Her shape changes. She lands upon those narrow hips
Then rises in a cruel twist, breathes the mist of seasons,
And she sings in a tongue that could be sorrow's own
Or joy's, or the cry for return. Always, her kind calls them
To return home, to remain bound to porch and hearth
Just when they might break free and leap a gnawing creek.

She hunches down and flexes hard: The dogs see her joints bend,
Inhale her changing scent, try to puzzle what was meant
By half-flight or that shimmered skin, unfeathered, unfurred,
As she catches in her eyes a shaft, a glint of final suns.
They know that she is whistling to herself, as if to say,
Come home, come home, and I will give you shelter,

Come home, come home, and I will give you my arms.

George Szell and the Chicago Symphony Play *Don Juan* by Richard Strauss

Three great greasy dump-trucks shaped like a boy's hands,
 Carrying gravel over on the Loop, have crashed together
 Like a monstrous god's cymbals. An alarm of brakes,
 The whine of doubled tires splitting into flaps of shape,
 Cop cars sneering their way through the fluting of snow
 Off the swollen lake. Something like this always happens
 During the concert season, sneezes of a terminal bassoon,
 A pigeon falling loveless from the darker curtain joints
 And landing with a pious plop before the second-chair-
 Second violinist who fails harmonics with her doubled cramps.
 By the annunciation of the second theme, traffic copters
 Are reporting multiple fatalities in the pileup, their sound
 Above the hall like some Benzedrine Tarzan beating his pecs
 At quarter note equals one-twenty-five. The audience stirs,
 Yawns like an analog wrist watch after a heavy lunch.

Gasoline and blood are flammable when mixed together,
 Even if ice blows them cold, just as love explodes
 Into a delirious orchestration on the least-expected night
 Or even in a matinee performance, all bowing and brass.
 And just when you have finished, there is this feeling,
 Quite clear, that something terrible has happened,
 Something very close and personal and with an ending
 You have to strain, lean forward now, to hear at all.

Not far away, three trucks may have blown into obscurity,
 And the last sound may be the piccolo tinkling of ice falling
 From a stop sign. Or there may be lovers pumping toward
 Lakes they believe lie flowing with tropical delight.
 But a freezing sets in, and George Szell drops his arms
 And lets them play on and on. This piece has an ending somewhere,
 But why bother anymore? Why bother with explanations?
 Everyone in the hall turns east, toward the humped fireball
 That is already beginning to fade into the dark sounds of heat.

A Dream of All Time, Then Awakening

I have awakened into the shape of memory.
I rise from the knotted sheets and float outside.
Death rescinds all sentences to the past tense,
And I am holy. The hawks watch my shadow.

I have no time for the sacraments of plot:
Soon the shaving mirror will allow me alarms,
Old eyes again mapped with wrinkles and shame.
I have no words as I press my palms and fall.

I should not kneel here in the quiet distance.
Friends are near enough for voices to resound.
I float toward that familiar time in love
As I have not done since our first kisses.

I have awakened into the shape of moons.
The phases will connect my people to me
Again, the lost and speaking, in their slow chain
Toward calendars and the thinned emulsion

Of old photographs. I have awakened to a sleep
And know distance, and that is the sentence
Of those who would live past what is far,
What is so distant, and what is so very deep.

Dying in My Sleep

One day I will oversleep into the memory of children:
 No goodbyes, just a shunt from dreams of seaside palaces
 Into a blink of endings, one odorless drop of ink from which
 I will never feel the nudge of light. It is coming for me,

Predatory and apologetic. The weakest diseases kill
 Their hosts, keep their cellular gnawing too long,
 Drunks who close the bar then stand pissing in the snow,
 Dumb with wonder at the absence of that warmth.

No farewells then, either. All the histories half-memorized,
 Salamis and El Alamein, the scansion of Pre-Raphaelites,
 Ways to thunk a watermelon to test its ripeness,
 The perfect cast of eight-pound-test line for bass: gone.

They will say, "He died of sleep," and that is always
 Half the truth, as any truth is only half the truth.
 I die for dreams, too, the ones which rip like old silk,
 The kind someone's father brought back by rucksack

From the sleep of China, before the war had killed so many
 Of the ones who took it wide awake. I will die in the split
 Second of my favorite dream, where warmth has come
 Back into arms that were corrupted with ice ages,

Where love enfolds the wisdom of my unsweetened hour.
 I shall endure mythologies, the Man of Sleep, whose face
 Haunts them when they curl up from rough muscles
 And think their rest is for a single night. They do not see

As I have that no rest is rest enough, that I should have roused
 Myself again, refused to lie down this night: We sculpt
 Our graves in many shapes, and some are room on room.
 This, my bed, is the sorrow I may not outdream,

These, our beds, sag with the shape of vanishings.

Emergency Love Technician

I have come to resurrect dead emotions, to bring your lover flowers
 As you once did, to position her arms for hope,
 Love damp lilies in the spring patter in a back yard glen.
 I will have you repeat the words after me,
 Defibrillate hearts gone leather and laid upon at TV tray
 For the evening news. I shall remind her to dance
 On Friday nights at the VFW, wear the cool alcohol
 Perfume from Woolworth's, fear and demand her breast
 Be touched in the spring-shot back seats of Chevrolets.
 I will write your name in her diary a thousand times
 With hearts to dot. I will pin a cymbidium orchid
 In the flat space where she salutes the flag in home room.
 The aroma will awaken you slumped in a spitball dream
 By the open window of an April afternoon. You will turn
 And catch the color of her hair as you might see a car turn off
 In the rear-view mirror, before you knew it was following you.

I have come to make her lips part slightly, damp with desire,
 As if she had just eaten a delectable plum and its fragrant liquid
 Clung to the fingerprint whorls of her mouth. I shall take her
 Shoulders and square her up toward your eyes, which are clear
 Again like a boy's, forgetting political recriminations,
 Years of subtle warfare. She will take the friendship ring
 From your palm and look upon it with a softening wonder,
 Open into dampness like jonquils overnight from rain.

She will see you rise from the recliner one Thursday night
 And know you have suffered for her, brought her lilacs
 From the far meadow long after darkness, have come riding back
 On some heroic horse all muscle and steaming flanks:
 She will come to you bearing the splendor of youth
 Like a chalice, step on step across the rug, and her cane
 Will be the dagger of your love. I will leave then as I came.
 You will take each other as petals take the May,
 See the world distant and harmless as all good children do,
 As blossoms break apart, damp and hot and swollen
 And ready for the penetration of their second, and better, youth.

Betty's Crown

Betty wore a cat upon her head to shop.
The tail swung back and forth like wipers
Past her rainy eyes. A clarity possessed her
On those days, as if the world's predictions
Of ideas and of prayers might suddenly explode
Into flames of fur delight. Betty's crown enjoyed
The sights, the undergarments limp and splayed,
The crockery and treasures of the shoe and sock.

They sometimes slid upon the park's calm lake,
Propelled by David with his paddle and his smile.
They went miles. The cat's embrace was steadfast.
The cat's hauteur was simply grand. Betty watched
For a wedge of swans to show them love
And grace. The cat's green eyes watched David
Half to death. They gathered all the courses he devised.

Betty wore the cat upon her head to sleep.
They crumbled into covers with a careful tuck.
The cat took time to knead her hair into a braid.
Then he licked her stories with a rubbed tongue
Like princesses who spare their heads with verb and noun.
Betty turned the light out then: such a splendid crown!

Falling in Love

I am sure of many things, the confidence man, glitter, camps
Of soldiers in the desert preparing for death
As if it were a meal; but I am no longer sure that love
Hurts as it should, like a big brother grabbing you
Around the neck and hitting your skull half hard.

Love should climb me like the vines on a vacancy sign.
It should spray paint my face with slogans
Of a political nature, elbow me in the solar plexus--
A bad wrestler when the referee is distracted.
Love should break china. It should be sharp and rude.

I watched two lovers standing beneath old oaks
On North Campus, afraid to let go, brief kisses,
The imprint of his shoulder on the skin of her cheek,
Breaking, then returning. I want to be in such agony.
I want the walls to fall in on me. Is that asking too much?

We have grown into tectonic plates, my old lover,
Who gives me groceries and clean clothing,
Spreading continents apart with the deliberation of jurors.
We live for the comfort we design. We lie apart
Under ribbed blankets with their separate controls.

Which is the point of love, I suppose: Enough of it,
And you are no longer afraid, and fear is what gives it
The intensity, and intensity is what gives it glitter,
The purpose of soldiers going into battle over land
They do not even want, not a single one of them.

I want to be afraid with them. I want to die trying.

Falling Into Boulder Dam

He lies within the shape of bodies.
Sleep curves him. His hands are bent and open
And could hold a flute, give it the breath of music.
A weight of wetness folded up its great gray belly
Along his rendered jeans. Her letter fell as he did
Into sentences that now are stone and water.

When a boy, he pretended burial, lying stiffly
Upon a Mother's bed, hands crossed upon his chest
Until a giggling began. He heard his own name then
From her lips, the wonder of geese, the wounds of water.

He lost his balance, fell into a different tense.
For three seconds they saw his body curl in disbelief,
As a boy, in his adolescent mirror, sees the rubble of beard.
The waterfall of batter poured upon him, and his breath
Bled once into the dark lake of the dam's wedge.

What does a wall hold back? Air? Rooms where lovers
Wave upon the frail cracker of a bed? The places where families
Hide their sorrows in the wet clay of whispering,
Where each morning men remold their memories
And head for the latticework of dams and regret?

The light of waves will wash his cheeks. Water will
Connect us: The strength of his solid shadow helps
Ignite our reading lamps in the quiet streets of town.
We dream that solid flow will bear us, too,
Preserve our fall like a boy's camping sleep.
The water rises behind him each day then spills,
Over what is too tall, over what is too deep.

Feeding Time for the Bears

What would the taste of our flesh be to bears
 With discrimination and seasoned palates? Is Southern man
 A delicacy, goes well with stream water, a delightful
 Essence that lingers on the palate for two suns?
 Or would they chase down the scent of women
 As men do, thrilled by the romance of blood,
 The kind words when all moons have turned ash?

They must rank us by size and aroma, how hard
 We fight back on the hook of their claws, struggle,
 Scream that life which ends in such bitter irresolution
 Cannot have been designed by a benign creator.
 That is the great shock, not being savored to death,
 But that we are all designed for equal and eventual
 Dissolution. Or do bear-chuffs sing up a requiem?

I would ask the bear for time to learn calligraphy,
 To visit my relatives who are shut-ins,
 Pay my taxes, pick up one overdue car tag decal,
 Earn a Black Belt or learn the terms of ursine surrender.
 I would beg that he roll back on his bear hindsides
 And let me play upon the tenor recorder a Renaissance
 Love song from the Medici court. Is that too much?

He has already picked out my rank dreams, though,
 Is gaining through the disordered images. The first bite
 Will be a thigh, and he will find it juicy and rich,
 Or he might go first for the hors d'oeuvre of a penis,
 A ripe bunch of sweetbreads for the picking like wild grapes
 In their season. He will stand over me and roar away
 The others: This is my body, which is broken for him.

Or would the bear take one bite and spit me out,
 Rinse in the Coosawattee, gargle memories of fish and voles
 To rid himself of the taste? Surely all bears have a preference
 For certain types just as we do when we eat them alive
 And destroy them, not for food but the bright pleasure
 Of the competition. Wildly, we tell them how children
 Are tough, cannot be eaten, will not sustain them in snow.

We think we are safe on a Sunday morning with the papers
On our laps, the smell of coffee and eggs, and then,
As the hair bristles on our arms and necks we smell the bears
In the next room arising from their terminal sleep,
Dry mouths smacking for a cup of blood, small black eyes
Shining beams, laser pointers on our shoulders, down our trunks,
Which they will scratch to pieces in a certain season.

I am not to your taste, I say, backing up, Scotch-Irish,
Ancestors who plowed, got drunk, scraped Highland fiddles,
Danced themselves into apoplexies. My people were not eaten
By your people: Go for a Mediterranean meal, an olive-skinned
Greek woman with an accent who has been waiting years
For her husband to come home. She can be devoured by any bear
Who sails up in the yellowed ivory of his ancient smile.

Fer de Lance

Drive your spike
Through my heart:
It is almost like
Dying for me to part

With it. Too bad.
Like irises and phases
Of a moon, it's sad
That all our mazes

Are resolved in blue
Veins soon snapped.
That is all I'll ever know.
And I am trapped.

First Loves

Her hair was night, and a barrette of stars held that lock
Back from her smile. I was a boy, growing metaphors
Like root-knots outside her presence, sure she could see
Through me. I thought everyone could surely do that.

Then she touched my hand, and the star fields condensed
In mass and exploded. I looked at her and then away
Because she would see that I could not turn away
And know the weakness that bent me like iced limbs.

So long ago I might confuse it with Egyptian kings
Or Flaubert carving out his sentences by lamp glow.
So long ago the boy has changed into a secondary arch,
The way fruit past its season goes into another shape.

By thirteen her hair had turned from daylight to honey
And when she took my hand she smelled like a girl
With an oval face and blue eyes. She was petals,
Cinnamon, a thousand fragrant bathings in warm water.

A shape so smooth it is nearly hairless. A slender wrist
Encircled with a silver bracelet that her father made.
An ankle so carelessly crossed above its mate that
The two bones made a slender cross that was faith to me.

Seven house-sized boulders lie between my house
And the creek, and even they change year by year,
Flaking off their surfaces with moss and falling limbs.
Even they exhale their shape into the dust of moons.

Formal Invocation to the Roses of Youth

We have gathered in this place of sanctity to grieve
For roses, their aroma and color as used symbolically
In adolescence to represent innocent lust. We must.

A thing that smells so sweet, crowned with thorns,
Blah, blah--none of that bears repeating this New Year.
Some things, opening, turn to rust. We must keep the trust.

All these secret pretendings drive us green and mad:
Santa Bunny, Easter Claus, Romeo and the Beast:
It's all a smear of riotous blather. For me, I'd rather

Stem some flood of rose-lipt lads who dance in lines
Along the Somme, send them home to fornicate
And die restrained among their lather. Oh my father

Listen to my plea: one worm, one inconsequential
Rose, doomed to bud in ice, another ignorant metaphor
Not worth another dime (or penny). There are many.

Now rose altars braise our lands, squalling pig
To savory ham. I should be mortified to think of all
The time I wasted never sinning. Flower me, winning.

Day of the Groceries

On this day the cereals and juices get to pick
 Their humans for a meal, the tender boys,
 The leathered grandmas with their dimming eyes.
 The luncheon meats will select a Scout Troop
 To enjoy, the pretzels take a man with hairless arms.

Sudden justice sometimes takes the easy way:
 The eater and the eaten go their separate paths,
 Take different aisles toward solemn hours.
 They kneel before some altar rail and consume
 The screaming grape, the crackled, sickled wheat.

Things are different now: Lettuce will entreat
 A Realtor to observe the crisp wet beauty of the greens,
 Say *I pick you* to the sullen lady in a sunset coat.
 Alpo will turn upon its rim and genuflect before a man
 With black mechanic's hands, taking on rough trade.

Corn takes twins. Ground round picks a swimmer
 Flapping from the pool in slapping shoes. Sticky buns
 Pursue a toothless female gnome. Aisle by aisle
 They take their humans for meal. By dawn the paths
 Of glory will be littered with their rings and bones.

Ice Age

My daughter all apples
In the sudden snow,
And I want to reach her,
Knowing that to reach

A daughter, a father
Must never let her age
In the way he treats
Her and so act ridiculous.

But I am tired of acting
Ridiculous for people,
Their dancing parlor poet
Who lives on new words.

I am tired of being asked
What I'm working on,
Because I'm working on
Going back to when she

Was seven and loved me
In a different way,
And I have tried a hundred
Directions by the compass

And none lead me there.
You can take all my words
And use them to start a fire.
That's how much they mean.

And so she bends to cup
A handful of ice to throw
At me, and I cannot bear
The end of our ice age.

She must know I keep
The woods around her safe.
She must know that snow
Comes back, all blossoms.

The Ice Cream Child

Not lemon chiffon or coffee walnut--just chocolate
In a waffle cone standing calf-deep in the late day's tide,
Being thirteen and wondering if all husbands are cold.

Her father sits in the sun-stroked chair, drinking alone
And still upon the same page as yesterday, her mother
In the motel room crying. Every day before sunset,

Her mother holds her eyes with damp palms,
And the vanilla lies begin: headaches, muscle cramps,
A change in the air pressure that turns her wild.

Her father then shivers toward the sun, burns again,
The color of autumnal berries as his sighs are melted
Into brine. He give his girl dollars for a cold cone.

Now she feels her legs growing toward fourteen,
And a boy has been watching her from the pier,
And she wants to wave him to him or wave him off:

*Come unto me you who are terminally damaged,
And I will show you what cold really means.
I will show you a true country in the shape of ice.*

Interviewing Miss Louise

An old woman I was interviewing
Let her left eyelid come down
Over the glistening stare
And I could not tell
If she had whispered up a death
Or flirted with me,
Suddenly back sixty years
And borne by the aroma of starch,
And sweet honeysuckle, vined
Outside her window on a trellis,
Planted there by her father,
A good man who is vice-president
Of the First National Bank
Of Madison, Georgia.

Just Dancing

A cold rain plays the lyre of oaks this morning:
 Greek music, a pale overtone series of mathematical equations
 In a grove where the Hitchiti once danced
 Or an after-plowing breakdown broke down near morning.
 I'll take my dawns with salt. There is no difference
 Between seasons and seasonings today, missing church
 Because something is that edifice has died,
 Just as it has died in rain among the oaks.

I want lines with a classical turn, garments like albino pigeons
 Or the skies of Greece high above cliffs crumbled
 With centuries of dancing. I want to die in clover
 Gnawing sticks of hard-curved cinnamon,
 Or beneath the new hospital sheets where my feet will begin
 To glide upon their own instructions.

I'm tired of spending all my nights
 Calling out to Wallace Stevens, asking when he meant
 With his imperial and clerical words. That was his control,
 The death in the sanctuary, the dance, pale windings of India,
 The old farmer climbing down, bent bone on bone
 And heading for the house that has lost its savor,
 Where he will sit in his recliner, push the dusty glasses
 To his forehead then feel his feet grow cold.

The rain is not salt. Oaks and sapling poplars sorrow.
 The Hitchiti are all in the ground. Church does not miss me.
 Beauty does not smell of cinnamon or fit us like recliners.
 I cannot name what has been pouring into me lately.
 But it has not come from love, and I will not give birth
 From it. Why should we wrinkle into memory
 Is what I am asking. The rest is just dancing.

Landscaping

I have a lime tree in my arbor, which my landscaper inserted
 Largely for color, I believe. The idea was to duplicate the pastels
 You see in certain doctors' offices, prints designed to make you
 Feel as if the world were floating slightly above itself,
 That fog had color, and its message is that heaven is close.

There is a flagstone walkway to the pond. Centipede grows
 In between the stones, smooth and generous. A willow bends
 Over, old man picking up a penny. The eye is drawn inevitably
 To the real absence of line or color. There is not one thing
 In this design that might offend anyone. All this work

Took place before I was ruined financially. Now the lime tree
 Sprouts foul lumps that shrivel and pucker, crone's cheeks.
 A damp disease cankered the azaleas, so great wild lumps
 Rot the limb structures. The kiwis held their ritual suicide
 By moonlight, as if making a point that I couldn't miss.

Death is so colorful. A freeze cracked the flagstones
 To the pond, and they crumbled like a plate of last night's
 Saltines. Kudzu has attacked the arbor in force, winding
 All the pressure-treated slats in yarn, with purple flowers
 That smell like a Nehi grape soda. This was unplanned.

Two designers I know were at my house when I got home
 From work, reading last rites and throwing salt to the winds,
 Asking forgiveness for color and line. They lashed themselves
 With willow whips. Behind the deck they found tangled
 Passion flowers, advised me to spray them until they died.

The grass did die. A foam of moss has spread down the hillside,
 Soft to the bare feet, saying green is green or not, depending
 On how angry the homeowner is on a particular day of the week.
 This is a lesson I have needed for some time: plan nothing;
 Accept side trips; hail the fruit of sunlight; keep on growing.

Learning to Suffer

The headache I had yesterday was so bad I pushed
My temples with both hands like an EMT applying life
To a fatal wound with hope and all reasonable strength.
I grieved for the absence of pain. Swarms of injustices
Provoked me, clothing lint, dirty dishes, the spark
That will not rise from my dead Buick's battery. Patton
Could not bear the absence of pain, and I thought there
Are people who cannot bear too much of one thing
Or another, and therefore I could not have received
The sacrificial stings of vermin on DeSoto's lost curve
Across our South. See me: Left sitting along some path
Near Orlando without even bus fare, and the sound
Of Indians less afraid by the moment, our sleek dragons
Headed north, and me prime for puncturing, the eternal
And designated victim. Let's not get carried away with this:
A tangled vasculature caused me to miss the Inman Trio
Playing Beethoven. I had planned witty conversation,
A stable man who knew his place and buffed it regularly.
Instead I wondered of the short goodbyes when strokes
Or heart attacks announce themselves with the grandeur
Of a requiem. We should have time for complex speeches
Without pain to interfere, but I was so sick I wanted to curl
Up into the shape I took before birth when my head
Became tight and tighter then cold and colder,
And I realized how little there was to talk about in between.

Lens

What comes clear,
What comes sharp,
The strings of ancient instruments,
The smile to strangers
The pleasantries of fame.

Or maybe now a tear
Might magnify each shape
Into fragments of intent
And show where we are ranging
Is the place we've always stayed.

Lighting Candles During a Storm

My daughter rises down the stairs, the memory of fear
 Borne in the planets of her eyes: All the world
 Explodes through the forest outside my bedroom window,
 She says, and I cradle that death with my unstable arms.
 She crawls between us, and I sanctify the fiction
 Of her safety, my wife dreaming in the shape of her breath.
 In a sudden timpani shout, the red-eyed clock turns black,
 And I tell them to await my coming. I will go for candles.

I fall up the carpet steps in the shadow of fur and whiskers,
 Her cat asking what it is I cannot see. I find the kitchen,
 And through the panes above the sink where spiders spin
 To catch moons and starfields, I see the backdrop of memory.
 I see cabinet knobs bulge in the dragon flash of lightning,
 Take out two candles and a box of matches. They have waited
 For me there, possessors of the secret light.

She hurries me downstairs, sure that I will bear her flames.
 I am grand and huge, the viceroy of storms. (Only later,
 When she sees me stop some fall while raking leaves,
 Trying to remember a name, a day, rising like a fish to bait
 I shall refuse for hunger's sake, will she know I was
 The lure of dragon light, sacrificing myself as her shadow
 To the storms: *He never fought what might consume him.*
 She will feel the rush of pity shake her bones, speak
 Incantations to protect me from threat of breaking limbs
 In the cold-front rush of an autumn's winds.)

Now I strike the candles into invincible delight.
 My wrists are broader than the rain to my daughter
 As I come down the stairs and on into the darkest maze
 That she will never fear again. The cat glides triumphant
 In the shadows that we cast from candle light and wild hair.
 Frames rattle, but she is not afraid. She sees my eyes wrinkle
 And age before her, but she is not afraid. All my life
 Is a single prayer for storms and this salvation.
 All my life is a daughter's smile to believe I could save
 Her from anything and forge those ancient charms
 Against the darkness, against the fragility of our days.

Like A Virgin

I want to achieve significance the color of snow
When it melts in the gutters, bitter, brackish,
Blue as tar. I want to change your life twice.

Once is insincere, it occurs to me: moon stars
Fish hearts, whale beads--I want to distribute
Your dreams to the masses for a nominal fee.

I want to steal every good idea you'll ever have
And flake it, manufacture crystalline snoods
For the old ladies and their doily speeches.

I want to be the greatest girl who ever sang off key.
I want to swarm with lilies and go west for the autumn,
Stopping off for interviews at the luminous wicks

They still call towns. This is America, isn't it?
Can't I be famous for nothing as easily as money,
Judgment, prayer, works of art, athletic skill?

I want to change your life without talent of any kind.
I want to charm your drawers off. I want you to call
Your closest friends so they can serve as my references.

I have never done this before, so touch me gently.
Touch me gently, but first I want you to pay me.
I want all you have ever dreamed, and then some.

Being Lonely

Loneliness says *Something is about to die*
But you watch the ice-crusted jonquils instead
As they unfold by the front door, yawning up
Too early, but it's not too early. They like cold
As petunias do, shuddering from wind or stars.
This winter night sprouts constellations of bulbs,
And the Woman who has planted them among
The soil of blackness understands how solitude
Huddles us together like rain shuts the boys
Among their winter dreams. I have been thinking
For days that *Something is about to die*,
Then it does not, and I see the first forsythia
Escape its knot, and I hear the sparrows shuffling
Among the seed I spread upon the sills,
And I break with wonder that something may live,
That all of us may go on living for days.

I strain to hear the whisper that sits me up
In bed among the twist of mourning sheets,
To shape its sighs as Dante did into a tale
For telling by the fireside light. The breathing
In that vault does not say *Something is about to die*,
So I cannot say what I feel or want to feel.

I walk outside on to a shield of stars, half naked
With desire. I kneel and brush back the crust
From flowers who are stunned with frost,
And they are all wick, and if I lean close enough
To shape the pistil, stamen, stalk, they will laugh
Into the memory of all stars, and they will stay with me
All night and give me fragrance for my only heart.

Losing Faith

What we love intensely is not what matters intensely:
Small affections, moss and coves that cradle rain,

Light that seems to fill the afternoon hills immensely,
That keep us poised and solemn on a small town lane.

We claim a soul that bears our bodies on this trail,
Or an essence of belief or shapes of hickory and beech

That hover in our winter breath. Is the soul like fog, pale
And floating just beyond our stride, our fragile reach?

Souls evaporate, too. They are only crayon marks
Of children showing worlds as they can never be:

The loving dead among us in their national parks,
With sunsets ripe as flowers, meadows stately as the sea.

Love Among the Old

Do not stray from what you cannot see.
The roses will not bring you back to me.

Petals crimp and crack upon my palm,
So I know the game's unfairly won,

As a boy will smile to bring his mother back.
I am too aware of what I lack

To pretend that love will have its charming way
With us. Every syllable that you say

Is true and meant to wear my kisses down,
And I will wear my failures like a crown.

I will wear my failures so your friends can see
That even they can understand what's wrong with me.

Do not kneel at altars, for you cannot see
My faithful roses falling from their stems, free,

Meant for meaning, my former youthful tart,
Meant for anything, my former heart.

Love Poem

I do not want to be angry with you anymore
If that is possible. Czars, political institutions,
Stolen rubies, troops that storm the palace:
I will give up my rights to them for this gift.

I want you to come with me by the river
And I will show you the otters, how delight
Is contagious, how the great mystery goes on
Without us anyway, and we are but one dream

In its history. I will show you a corner of time
Where we age into grace like summer swans.
I will show you that my hands no longer roll
Themselves into despair or prayer anymore.

I want the light to enter us as we pass toward
Water, my thirty-years love. I want you to know
That I relent. I want you to see me young again
And bring me bread and a glass of cold milk.

Bless us for the mistakes we have not yet made,
Though I have tried. I still shape great miseries
For us both. But I do not want to be angry anymore.
Please wear this around your neck as my gift

Of anniversaries and passings: the jewelry of light,
The remembrance of shadows, then our arms.

Lover Come Back

Your absence sticks me to like a melting summer road,
My darling of the cities, so come back. The bark
Has begun to fall from my shoulders, and I am reading
Tracts from the County Agent to see if sprays or unguents
Might delay this loss of armor. Before you left this time
You called me a loser. The pamphlet says those who drop
Their bark early *could* be losers, but this is not as certain
As those who lose their fruit before it entirely ripens.

I didn't tell anyone about you and the fruit, my love.
Only losers would do that. But the seasonality of affection
That you have always shown me is like a hard knot
Of pomegranate hitting the loam with a plop then rotting.
No sweet seeds to suck then, my darling, no rind to gnaw.

All the leaves have fallen. I raked my own days ago.
Yours are still here blown across the bedspread in a rush,
And I have left them as a monument to your absence.

Now the crumbs of this bark are gathering around my feet
In testimony to love. At least I *believe* it has to do with love,
Though everything I read is deliberately vague on this point.

Men

Beg me like you were an alcoholic.
Order call-waiting for the phone and I won't call
You. I'll wait. Turn slim and model
Calypso pants. Get a bikini wax.

This business is so full of hacks.
You should jump off a copy
Of *Virginia Woolf, A Biography*
By Quentin Bell and see what breaks.

You should do this for women's sake.
Beg me for the instructions
To assemble this goddamn thing,
And I will give you a hammer.

You'll wind up in the slammer
If you love me. You know that, have seen
Me in action. Beg me for keys.
Beg me for anything on your knees.

Moon in a Roadside Pool

No small winds shear craters on this surface of sky:
I fall into the galaxies, never see them coming
Until they have passed in the stellar wind, ice or fire
Blowing from my fingertips, raining toward moons.

A car's coming from miles off, lights swerve drunkenly
Around two curves: With quick calculations I predict
The parabola of blood, all distances between supernovae
And grief. And it is closer than I thought.

The driver passes me so fast I cannot catalogue
Diameter from his cigarette glow. His orbit is sustained
For now, but soon he will be carved in chrome,
The widow having known he never would come back.

But she is wrong. All light is heading toward reflection
Light years from us, and each year, that deathly crash
Will break over them once more, and he will die
Again and again, and that is the message from stars,

That what we are is little more than what we were,
That from such distance, we are all archaeologists
Of the circular. I look deeper into the pool of moon shade,
And think I see my own birth, or the unwound watch

Of my grandfather in his charcoal suit, coming
Round once again through Andromeda, spectacles on,
Spinning tales of what we thought was time,
But what was really love, the only flame we can endure.

The Movies

Dear folks, I'm in Hollywood, and I've been cast for a movie
About how Death comes in the night to our dearest and nearest.
Not sure yet if I play a pox or a pretty. I am ugly. This is your fault.

Did you look side by side in the mirror to conclude the outcome
Of unprotected sex might be the worst of you both? That eyes
The color of dung, a vast chin, acromegaly hands--never mind.

Some of the ugliest people I ever met were the kindest. The church
Counts this a miracle, like Jennifer Jones showing off her cancered
Leg to the horrified Mother Superior and showing no trace of pain.

That's not why I was cast in the film about Death, however.
It was because I met the director's wife at a dinner party my agent
Set up, and I burned my hand over the candle flame, reaching.

She said, "Oh, you've burned your hand." And I looked at it calmly
And said, "But it's not done yet" and I slid it back into the flame
Like an oven-mitted hand slides a casserole along its burning rails.

Now I have a certain reputation. It's inevitable. I am a monster.
Think Boris Karloff playing with the flower petals and throwing
Them in the water to watch them float. I'm their Death Pet.

(I've tried, but I can't conceive of my conception. An ovum shuddering
With disgust but unable to shake off the winner, who plucked her
Cell surface, as if to spread a kind of puerile ugliness over the world.)

There's nothing to it. You stand in front of a camera, which is a mirror
Once removed, and say all the things in your heart, and they come
Afterwards and see if your hand still hurts and if you need water.

They ask if you mind being exploited, and the script calls for you
To say, "Why heavens, no. I have always been just like I am now.
Even the hideous deserve immortality. Even the dead need love."

My Girl*For Megan*

Dear blossom: Let me love the sound of your hair
And other impossibilities, the shape of your wait,
The laughter as you color red skies inside the lines.

Sit still: I will draw the shape of your feelings
When you ignore the provenance of my jokes
Or stand in line to shake my palsied hand, dearest.

I was going to advertise the fact that leggy girls
Are like the sea, but they are more like piano keys,
Black and white. You bear sharps into sunlight.

Nothing is very much like another thing: a lesson
You can afford to ignore. But let me love the color
Of your voice as you come home for my name.

Let me love the mirror that gleans your introspection,
Saves it inevitably for me as my surface cracks.
I bear this love through all nights. I am half heart,

And when that half corrodes in baronial splendor,
Forgive me such fancy. I love the smell of your eyes
As you turn and catch me inside them, like fireflies.

Myth of the Tropical Bird

I was walking along a ridge in Peru
 when a bird with red and gold feathers
 bled from the underbrush, accusing
 modern times, globalization, oil companies,
 international fruit dealers, men, white people,
 heterosexuals, suits with their industrialists
 looking for a dollar--it made a speech a thousand
 syllables long

 and I believed it, because that is
 my training from long years: One must know
 by instinct what is evil and what is benign
 what is truly green and what is hand-
 painted to resemble that color and its shades.

Or the bird may have been speaking my name,
 and I couldn't say I'd know the difference,
 since no real communication that humans
 ever receive is the same, since truth roves us
 like wrong-poled magnets, since we mistake
 kings for planets then find omens in the air
 when they make their wretched splash
 into the mountains or a nearby bay,
 crying like birds: listen! listen! listen!

to fields where no one has worked for days

O They Know

I would like to extend the hand of romance to this snow,
But it is out there feeding on the pine darts,
And they are falling, so there's a place I will not go.

Obituaries gather all the assembled brains and hearts,
But they stay in print for just a single day.
This snow comes down, but not all day, in fits and starts.

Children who will shape their lacquered palms to pray
Are so darling, aren't they? They build obese old men
Who are dying as their eyes are pressed, fresh decay.

I want to die, but I could do without the knowing when.
Or perhaps I might resist that lane and start to grow
Another body that a girl can shape down in the glen.

There is nothing I can say to stop the rush of snow.
A silence stuns the birds asleep and toward all green.
I wish they'd miss what tears me. But O they know.

An Ode on Rejection

Dear sir: We have now had an ample chance to review this suite
 Of poems, and we have decided to have you beaten.
 You know you want it. We could tell right off you want it
 Bad. Your work is fluid, facile, evident as a just-gigged eel.
 You have not read our magazine or else. We have not eaten
 In days, and that's half the problem. We do this for love.
 Doing anything for love is the other half of the problem.

Or we may have you harmed by the Waukegan Stalker,
 Whose craft is flawless, iambic creeping through the underbrush.
 He will slit your throat with a dull sestina. Or maybe you did not
 Really wish to take a beating? Perhaps you wanted us to humiliate
 You in front of relatives? A family reunion? During the ladling
 Of potato salad and the sips of lemon tea we could force feed
 You every word you sent us? Who's the eel then, Mr. Thing?

That is the problem: We always plan to stand up and sing
 Something like "Danny Boy" and have people crying in their beer,
 But instead we look for a new metaphor or simile: *Your verse*
Is one size too small. One size, sir, does not fit all.
 And if we send to have you beaten, will you take it like a man?
 Say, "I knew this was coming, and I'd like to thank you for
 it. May I have another sir? And another? And oh yet another?"

You know you've been asking for it all your life, for the editor
 To arrive just when the storm breaks, bearing a lithe whipping stick
 And a number two Eagle Mirado pencil, your manuscript shredded
 And then taped back together, as if we could stop editing
 Or you could stop writing. Well, what difference does a verb
 Make, anyway? We will tie you to an "enchanted autumn elm"
 And fires adjectives at the hole in your brain or your heart.

There are penalties for such attempts on your part.
 Life, Mr. Thing, is not art.

Old Man Watching Tent Caterpillars

He sees through them: The cotton candy living rooms of worms,
There are three chances that the weather may turn
This afternoon, but he sits shawl-bound anyway in the sun,
Cocooned in wool of his daughter's making, the color of clouds.
His eyes hold an hour on their perfected loom, all delight.

He has never done a thing so deliberate in this life,
Opening both sides of a country store for forty years
At seven, and the crunch of tires on gravel would spring
Him toward the pumps. That time also held a shape, and storms
Might shunt them toward checkers and a radio ball game.

Each year they come to spin tents from their own sleeping,
And his wife says they will kill the tree, gnaw down leaves
Until the limbs are stripped and hard. This cannot be true.
They split up the aging leaves among the herd and build.
This is the subdivision of trees. The weather feels changed.

The sun spins fractals in the webbing: a prism of glories,
Of yearly metamorphosis. They await the sound of wings to know
Their customers have arrived, the husks of blood and dew
They must drain to stay alive. Before long the tents will shrivel
Like radiated tumors, breaking into dust and blowing on.

He sees the surface but sees through it as well, and inside
They are writing denser sentences of silk. Rain is coming.
His shawl slides down the ship of shoulders into his stained lap,
And he feels an etching in his throat. Boys, don't leave yet,
He wants to say, this game ain't half finished, is it now?

If you listen, and the wind dies, you can hear the caterpillars
Humming out necklaces of flight. If you stand close enough,
You can hear their invocations. He thinks this: If you wrap
Your shoulders in a daughter's wool, you will grow wings,
And all distances will be transcendent in the rooms of light.

On a Bridge Over the Oconee River

Last year's rain flows down there rock to rock,
The color of persimmons gone to rot. Not even the rain
From these parts, but a shower veil for Ganges women
Running up a hill lately cracked with sun, cradling
Their un-hung-out baskets of laundry to their chests.

A suicide might break a leg, could more easily drown
In a claw-foot bathtub after evenings of despair and gin.
The river will not let them in. Two feet flowing,
Shore to shore, it could take canoes a mile,
But you would portage more. A bright indifference:

Sun skips across it like a rock, no small waves to crest,
Break up the mirror's sky. Different liquid, same shores
That baptized trails of boys when horses meant speed,
Exulted faster than a flood. Now two years of drought
Have brought up blocks of stone, wheels that bulge
Land to river, river to pain, pain to a salvation

Once believed by all who drove this span alone.
Now there is no consequence for that sin.
They come by ones and watch the teacup eddies flow.
But the river will not let them in.

Orthopedics

A numb spot grows along my spine.
My flesh tries on the clothes of absence.

Touch that point with something sharp
And it will dream of seasonal burrowing.

I should see the great physician,
But he's booked solid through the deaths

Of everyone he's every touched.
He will call me if something opens up.

In the meantime, I should try to bend
Toward the plots of my ancestors

And stretch those bones to see
If feeling will come back again,

If this is how all years creep
Or if it's just me. Probably just me.

Our Own Executions

I realize I have entered the wrong store: nipple clips, rolling papers,
 Maps of the Congo when white men in Belgium still owned it,
 CNN playing on a solitary eye-level-mounted television with audio
 From the Marquis de Sade hearings in 1965. I was looking for shoes.

I wanted soles constructed with such pluralistic craft I could creep
 Into the execution chambers of the already dead and share rites
 I learned in the Masons or was it the Kiwanis Club secret handshake?
 Can there be any difference in rituals between such old friends?

This store is meant for the feral: There is a whip to align me
 With the heterosacred, and I will kneel, be knighted and whine.
 The manager hates that. Already the security guards turn toward
 Me, nails on the blackboard of the whole complete entire universe.

Language, language, the parallel redundancies of language,
 What should I say or do? Let myself out in the quiet shoes?
 Relax recumbent and await the lethal injection? They discuss
 Trying out a new strategy on me, one with the cunning of the Belgian:

Before the death dose is administered, give the son of a bitch
 A drug that will make his flesh flay, a thousand spiked fires
 Going off all at once so that we can tremble with the ecstasy
 Of someone else's tortures? Watch the bastard writhe, eyes

Glossy as opals, mouth jacked open like a pit-fired pig's?
 All this for coming in the wrong store. Worse, I've arrived
 After store hours, and there's only a solitary custodian shuffling
 Through the Lindy over by edible underwear and handcuffs.

He says, "When you get in here, and the lights are off,
 And the motes are singing this pale non-liturgical chant,
 Then you know another one very much like yourself has walked
 The last mile. And the heat's turned off in there. Go on in."

Parsifal's Light

His eyes were pearls: first brine and sand, the portraiture of girls
 In their seasonal expectations, and light came from their spinning
 Delight. He paid a dunce for goblets at a county fair's cold whirls.

Cheating, we learn early in the scandals of our art, is a form of winning,
 Eyes cutting back and forth to see if we have been exposed by pearls
 That we took as fake but suddenly are real, turn vectors into sinning.

This world is smashed with the trumpets of processional earls
 Who flame oil pots on the crenelated embattlement to save
 The lost toward home. The heroine is white, with sculpted curls,

Of course, the kind of girl who, rising, comes outside to wave
 The pilgrim and the passionate back home where their plight
 Has been celebrated so long in the root-cellar or the costly nave.

Let us celebrate the obvious: darkness, too, is a form of light
 To those who seek and those whose burial is one true drink
 Of purpose, where they were headed all along, the lower flight.

So, his eyes were pearls when he stumbled over tenses toward his death,
 And all the people with their chain mail hearts should surely think
 Highly of one who turned eviction, with its liquid love, into a final breath.

He is the one you seek: Who smashed his gilded cup as if it might redeem
 The eyes of Buchenwald that scanned the wire for a weaker link
 Than they had ever known before, one shaped quite like pearls, like dreams.

Perhaps

I cannot bear that place, even in dreams,
 By which I mean the hill's crest where troops
 Overran our position. I was at best a boy.
 I was reading a letter from my girl, and this sound,
 Like a gnawing and rolling caterpillar a hundred
 Feet high grew louder. The men began to stir,
 Then a few ran off. We knew that we would die
 There in the fetid pasture where we'd dug in.

I hate being killed by my enemies. Happens
 One, twice a week when I stumble into traps
 They've set on my daily rounds. A shout
 From an alley, a fist on the door, the e-mail
 To let me know if I have sense I will fall back.
 I have sense. I fall back. I am always waiting
 For new orders out by the fountain, unsure
 If I should run, catch fire, flame out.

I don't consider spring a time of renewal
 In that sense, then. Spring is the season when I died
 First, and so I come to its blossoms with mourning
 And desire. I never knew until that warmth bled
 Over me that I even *had* enemies. Never occurred
 To me. I believed in the literal truth of things,
 Especially liturgical texts, but truth is only
 The trench-work of battle. It's not my style.

Perhaps if I changed my life to the second person,
 Saying *you* cannot understand this life, *you* tend
 Flowers that will not bloom, *your* position cannot
 Be defended--but always when I come from my car
 In the morning and head for work, its I I I I I--
 And the one who will be found dead on the field
 Without identification is not an abstraction, an idea.
 He will have no name, but he will wear my rings.

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Phone

I will not answer your call, my churlish friend
Of years gone. You are the snow of 1962,
No longer memory but a photograph unassigned to memory,
A church without pews, the call to worthlessness.

Too strong. I will not give you peace to end it,
To stop the dream no longer bell or cradle or receiver:
You will amaze us by going on when you should have died
On the ninth ring. You are climbing toward music

But you will not make it to motif, much less melody.
You are the death in the night, the uncle gone,
The cousin killed, the friend with cancers sleeping
Now forever in his satin basinet.

You trouble us into rising from the book we need
Or think we need but clearly use because we must
Avoid you. We wish to hear nothing from you
And cannot live long in your colder absence.

I sit here waiting for revelations, for an older song.

Preparations for the Trip

I am ready
To live again
Plums in the afternoon

I am ready
To swim again
August birds folded

I am ready
For love's theme
And variations

I am ready
For the crinkle
Of aluminum foil

I am ready
For you to slide
Yourself over me

I am ready
To outlast the fear
Of leaving nothing

That will outlast
Me by days
I am ready

I am ready
To turn west
As if on purpose

Reflections of a Boy's Face in the Surface of Well Water

Fourteen feet above the compact mirror of his artless hair,
Small as a dime, he sees himself framed by cumulus and summer
Daytime, and he wonders at the depth of that image:
Is the water twenty feet more, the heavens knotted up with stars?
The face is wrong, though the water does not move
From bucket, and the wind will not descend into that cave.

We live at the distance of photographs. Age blots
The gentle eyes, the longing, the discoveries of art and loss.
We recall that first forested night when owls bled
Vowels down the hunting creeks, and we awoke with talons
In our mis-folded legs. We did not speak her name
For fear that she would hear us and be gone when we returned.

We are the boys at their wells, and when we look down,
Young again, the world at our thin shoulders,
We want to resurrect the feathers of our small flights,
Away and then back, as we drifted. We want to curve
Downward into that face and hold it against our skulls
And grow boys once more like farmers near the well
Grew their cotton and their corn. We want to be the image,
Dime-small, that does not move and cannot quite believe
That we are framed by water and sky, that in all things
We are meant to be what we will become,
That we grow on and on, and still in our own place.

To this day, this quiet and luminous day,
We are very still and never leave our own place.

Remembering Springs

The forsythia is not blooming in my front yard
To the right of the front porch
Yet

But the genes responsible for buds
Have given their signal to form,
Set

Themselves along the whipping limbs
In ranks to claim yellow from the gray
Net

Of tree bark and the surface of brown earth
Where grass should be growing.
Get

Me your knife and let me scrape back
The skin of one frond to see the wick
Fret

With desire to pump up the flower heads
When warm rain starts to sweeten them,
Wet

As the days to come, wet as the hours
We sat alone in that swing. We had just
Met.

Repairing the Broken Vase

Take the crack
And trace its dim
Beginnings, slack
And restless kin.

Make a map
Of Belgium's dips.
Sew up your lap.
Grow fingertips.

Pieces cannot fit
Again, you fool:
Like having wit
And being cruel.

Don't be cruel:
Belgian whiskers
Never ruled
A country, mister,

Like the one
You piece together
Now for fun.
This new weather

Is the problem, dear.
Cold, then hot,
It cracks all fear.
Then be not,

That's all, unbreak
The broken life
For passion's sake.
Buy yourself a wife.

Run Away

My dog dreams up assassins
On the sofa, snail-fierce creatures
All poison and gnawing
Run run away

She jerks away from pain
O the pain never stops
She knows already
Run run away

Distant sounds are worse
Than nearby sounds
You learn this very young
Run run away

Fire freezes, ice burns
Wind leaves you solemn and still
Against the earth and sky
Run then run away

My dog cancels sin
With winter genuflections
On the sofa, but no good
She must run away

We are headed the same
General direction but she
Does not know it's me
Run then run away

She feels the sodden hurt
In her paws, knows whatever
Is chasing will catch her soon
And I know all too well

How true it is that she is chased
By what is chasing me
O the pain that never stops
Run run away

Sambo, Early Autumn, 1958

I saw my uncle breathing just before the grave
Held him small and cramped: jowled, soft lids
Of a girl in the sleep of a solemn afternoon.
I watched and knew the chest lifted once,
A vague stirring of an expected curse, a push
At the elbows, a glance for cigarettes and beer.
I stood on the soles of my Sunday shoes
And held the lip of coffin in my palms,
And through the open window there, on Fourth Street,
The traffic stalled along and toward the corner light.
No one else observed that he had come back
From dreaming; no one else saw his chest swell
With words and breath and bitter benedictions
For the coming earth. My brother held the room
Away from his keeping. My father wept among the jars.
And flowers bore us in our breathing
Toward that other kingdom where my uncle
Would sit to exhale and then to tell secrets
Of the silence that holds us broken, holds us down.

Samuel Barber's Piano Concerto, Op. 38, Canzone: Moderato

A shining, a child's play-pretty, falling by a spring pond
Where hydrilla waves in the sunken sunlight,
Gold coins minted in San Francisco spilling, obverse,
Reverse, observe, but very, very slowly,
A season changing but seen only in the tone of aspens.

If I kiss the mirror does that mean I'm mad?
Foolish? Beautiful? I want to grow elegant without
Question, the spilling of glitter, *buckets* of glitter
From the Flatiron Building on an autumn afternoon
When the sun has buttered half the street. I want
To know Barber well enough to call him Sam,

And to say I feel the glimmer of shifting mercury
From palm to palm when I listen to this movement,
But that it also spreads the cancer of melancholy
Through my less-important organs, and I want to be held,
To kiss someone as if that might keep millions of leaves
Falling, and falling in the order Cezanne painted them.

A droning, a bee's humming sniff of honeysuckle,
Where snow in spirals gems the pastel garden paths:
And my own image, my self, worth loving, in that glass.